THE NOVEL THAT INSPIRED THE HIT ANIME!

king of the city of ghosts

Slayers™

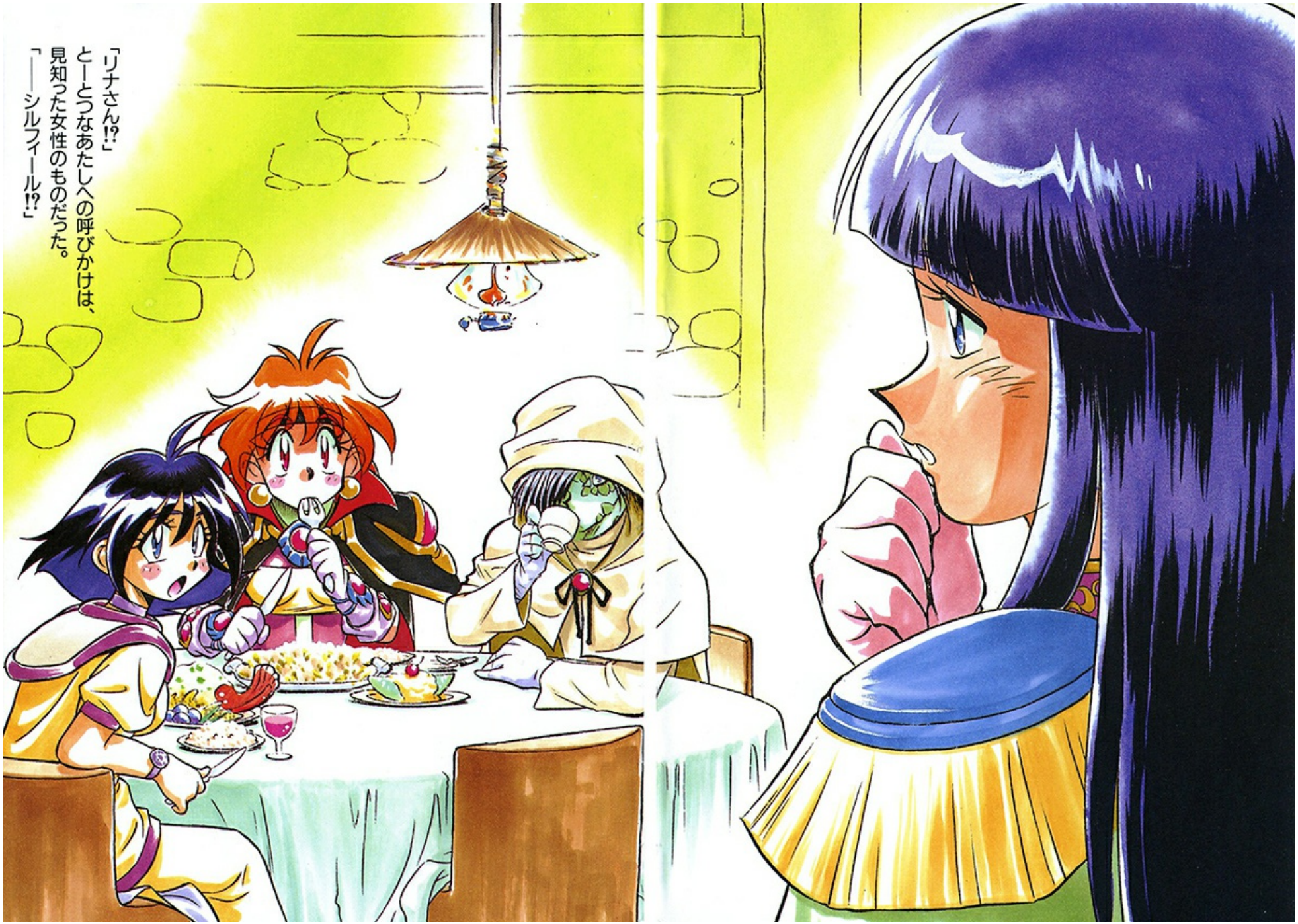
8

Hajime Kanzaka

TOKYOPOP®

スレイヤーズ8

死霊都市の王


「リナさん!?」
とーとつなあたしへの呼びかけは、
見知った女性のものだった。
「――シルフィール!?」

クリスタルの中に浮かび上がった人影。
「ガウリイさま!?」
声を上げ、シルフィールがかけ寄った。

SLAYERS

VOL.8: KING OF THE CITY OF GHOSTS

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The Time Has Come; Hellmaster Makes His Move

There was a white hand. It was a … woman s hand, maybe? Just a single, thin, white hand.

"Wha—?" I breathed, too stunned to say anything useful. My eyes focused on that hand, my gaze so morbidly curious that the world could've fallen down around me and I probably wouldn't have noticed.

The Ragna Blade attack I'd used on Chaos Dragon Gaav had sliced through both his crimson sword and his right arm. It was pretty successful, admittedly, but I was left with nada for magic energy; all I could do was look up at Gaav from my position sprawled on the ground. He'd been ready to take advantage of that fact, as he'd marched toward me with all the confidence of someone who couldn't lose … until he'd suddenly screamed when a single, slender arm had emerged from his belly. You understand my surprise.

"Wha—?" Gaav like me, didn't even get a full word out—but based on the look on his face, there was a good chance that it was hatred (and not blinding shock) that choked him off. He whipped his head around to look behind him.

"You!" he shrieked. "When did you … ?!"

The pain and malice in his voice finally made the situation clear. My blood ran cold.

Someone had thrust a *bare hand* through Chaos Dragon Gaav's belly from behind. From the looks of it, it'd happened the instant Gaav had focused all his attention on me. It wasn't anybody from my party, obviously. Normal spells couldn't even scratch Gaav, so ripping through him like wrapping paper was a phenomenon reserved for someone as powerful as—

"I've been here," a clear voice rang out from behind Gaav, "but it looks like nobody noticed but Xelloss."

Two things struck me at once. One, the voice wasn't a woman's —it was from a *kid*. And two, the voice actually sounded familiar.

What the hell?

"It's been a while, Lina Inverse." A small head popped out from behind Gaav. A pair of eyes focused on me, and maybe through me, considering that I practically felt a chunk of my brain fall out at that moment.

A small yelp broke free of my dry throat. I knew that face. Black, wavy hair. A boy of about eleven or twelve who looked kinda like a girl.

It was the boy from Galia City, the one I'd met while trying to uncover Gaav's plans. *The little boy who'd died when Xelloss had burned down the city*.

Without even thinking, and half aware of the truth as the words came out of my mouth, I managed to stutter, "Y-you're supposed to be d-dead."

The boy raised an eyebrow. "No one said I was dead— you just

assumed I was. Xelloss wasn't lying when he said I had no heartbeat. I just don't have a heart; it can't beat if it's not there, right?" The boy beamed, not looking guilty in the slightest.

My mind flew back to that moment in Galia City.

I had to admit that the situation was very like Xelloss—his specialty wasn't lying, it was leaving out important details. The entire thing made a sickening amount of sense.

"Is that a little boy?!" Amelia suddenly squeaked from nearby.

Based on how broken her voice sounded, she was still having trouble comprehending what was going on.

The boy smiled at Amelia. "Sure," he replied. "I'm in the *form* of a child, anyway. I can take any form I want, but this one is the most convenient. Humans are such interesting creatures … they let their guards down around children, which allows me to play all kinds of great tricks."

I swallowed the bile rising in the back of my throat. "Then that's why you never … gave me your name," I murmured.

"And I still haven't, have I?" The boy cleared his throat and made a small bow. When he looked up, I could see that his pupils were an empty void.

"I'm Phibrizzo," he said calmly. "But you can call me Hellmaster."

Hellmaster Phibrizzo. *Hellmaster Phibrizzo*.

Amelia, Zel, and even Milgazia were stupefied into silence, and I

sure couldn't think of anything to say. Really, what *do* you say to something like that?!

Gourry, who had apparently gotten up at some point, regripped the Sword of Light and glanced in my direction.

"So, is he famous or something?" he asked.

I didn't even bother being surprised with Gourry's now-predictable stupidity. He probably didn't remember Phibrizzo's name because it had too many letters in it.

Phibrizzo shrugged, apparently not bothered by the comment.

"I'm famous in some places," he admitted, "but not really among people."

That's a way to put it!

Gourry nodded knowingly. "I get it," he said, pointing the Sword of Light in front of him. He was facing Gaav, but I'm pretty he'd shifted his target to Phibrizzo.

I gritted my teeth. When that little urchin kid had "died" at Galia City, I'd blamed Chaos Dragon and his cronies. I'd been really, honestly angry.

Xelloss had known that kind of instigation would get me dancing to Phibrizzo's tune.

"You got me," I muttered through my clenched jaw. "You and Xelloss fooled the hell out of me."

A small smile tugged the corners of Phibrizzo's mouth. "You *did* do exactly what I expected you to do. Gaav, too." His gaze began to

shift. “But before this goes on any longer,” he murmured as his eyes settled on his impaling right hand, “you’ll have to excuse me.”

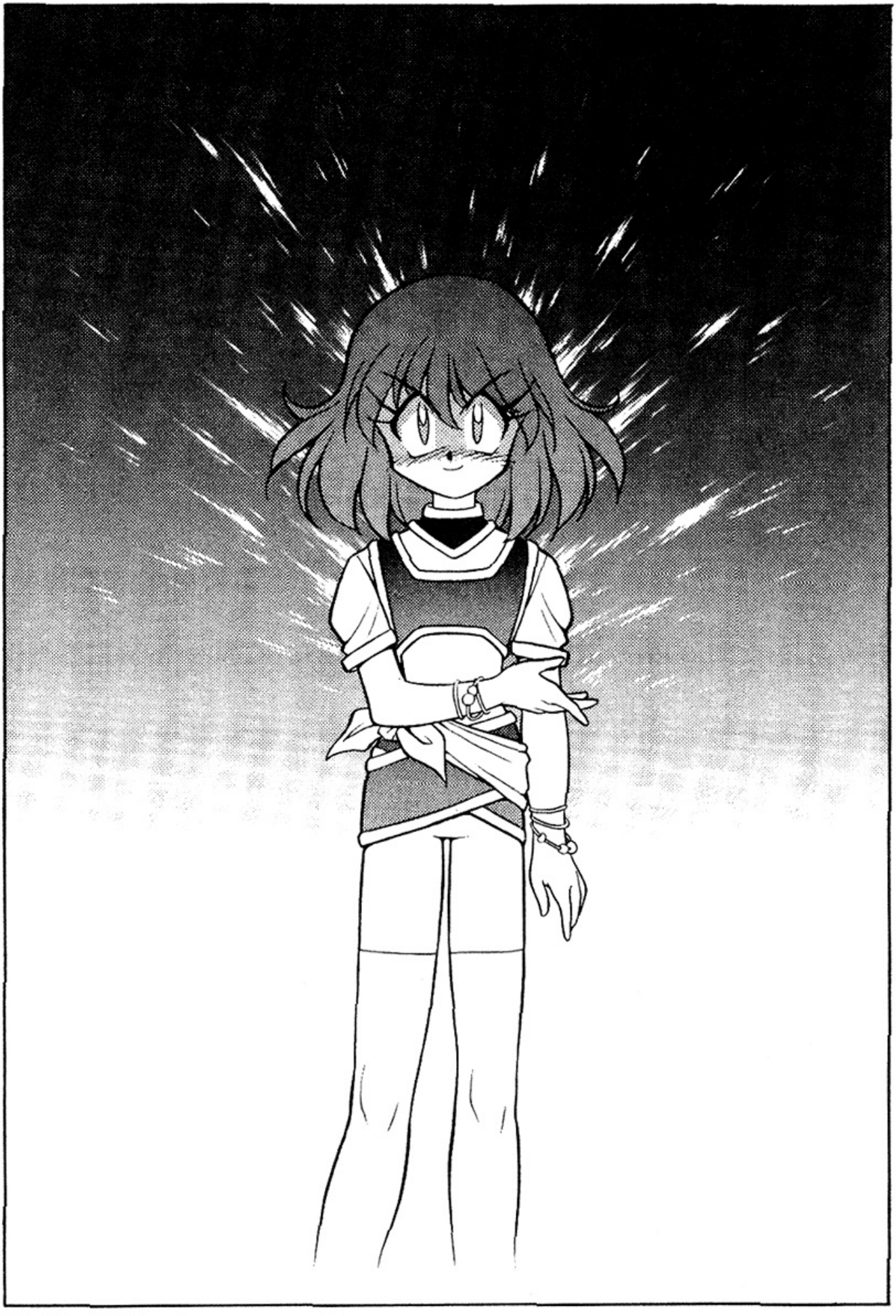
Gaav, silent and unmoving until then, suddenly howled in anger and swung an arm back at Hellmaster. It didn’t do much good.

FWOOM!

With a low, explosive sound, Gaav’s left arm was blown off.

“AAAAAAAGH!” Gaav shrieked as he fell to his knees.

“Don’t waste your time, Gaav. I’m stronger than you; you’re incomplete … let’s be reasonable here.” Hellmaster calmly looked down at the hand he’d pushed through Gaav. “I figured that you’d drive out your human parts after a while, but it looks like they got mixed in strangely. The Water Dragon King really got you, huh? And it looks like the old Chaos Dragon can’t be resurrected even if I *do* kill you.”



Gaav snarled. “You little … !” He twisted his entire body to glare at Phibrizzo. His sneering bravado couldn’t hide the shadow of death in his voice and movements.

“At any rate,” Phibrizzo continued, “I sincerely doubt you’ll submit to Lord Ruby Eye again in your condition. That being the case …”

“DAMN YOU!” Gaav roared.

“… this can only end one way.” Calm as you please, Phibrizzo paused.

And Chaos Dragon Gaav’s body burst into ash.

It all happened so fast. As the white, powdery remains of Gaav danced away in the wind, all I could do was stare like the useless spectator I was.

DAMN.

That disturbing sight did explain a few things. Chaos Dragon hated Hellmaster with a burning, bitter passion because Hellmaster was *stupidly powerful*. Even though I’d wounded Gaav and even though Hellmaster had surprised him, no one just vaporizes the Chaos Dragon with a smile.

Everyone else seemed too shocked or confused to really react to the situation; they just stared at Hellmaster dumbly. I didn’t really blame them.

“I get it,” I muttered, looking decidedly wimpy as I turned my head toward him from my spot on the ground. “This was all part of your plan, too. Wasn’t it?”

Phibrizzo smiled again. “More or less,” he said with all the spunk of his kiddie form. “I sacrificed one of my minions so that one of Gaav’s could learn about my plan to use *you*. After that, I borrowed Greater Beast Zelas Metallium’s Xelloss and had him join you—to watch you, if nothing else.”

“So after nearly getting me killed a bunch of times, you crawl out of the woodwork and stab Chaos Dragon in the back.” I glared daggers. “Looks like you got the easy part.”

“I suppose, Lina Inverse, but let me tell you something.” He raised an eyebrow. “I was the one who guided you to Xelloss when you were lost in the space leading to the Claire Bible. Xelloss can be pretty handy, but even *he* would’ve needed more time in a place like that.” He waved a hand dismissively. “No need to thank me, though.”

Gourry furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. “Uh,” he said dumbly. “I don’t get it.”

Of course you don’t.

“He used me as bait, Gourry,” I said thinly. “I got the traitor Chaos Dragon Gaav to show himself, and Hellmaster got to punch a hole in him.”

“That was definitely part of the plan,” Phibrizzo admitted.

“Part?” I narrowed my eyes. “You means there’s more to it than that?”

Phibrizzo paused. “I thought you’d already figured it out,” he said after a moment. “Unless you *do* know and you’re just trying to

bluff. Either way, the result will be the same." Phibrizzo seemed to suddenly lose interest in me and instead focused on Gourry.

"I have to admit," he murmured, "I never thought I'd see Goln Nova in a place like this. You just made my choice for me." Gourry blinked. "Choice for what?"

Phibrizzo began to walk toward Gourry, his voice disturbingly calm. "My choice of bait."

Crap!

"Huh?!" Gourry blurted. He quickly leapt backward, readying the Sword of Light in his hands.

Phibrizzo gave another one of his creepy little smiles. "Don't be scared," he purred. "Just because I used the word *bait* doesn't mean I'm going to eat you. Just relax and—"

"Ra Tilt!"

Amelia's voice suddenly tore through the air. I hadn't noticed her chanting the spell, but she had excellent timing.

Phibrizzo's words were cut off as his body was engulfed in a pillar of blue flame.

FWOOM!

The flames burned for a second, then vanished into nothing. Hellmaster still stood there with the exact same expression on his face.

Amelia's jaw dropped. "What?!" she yelped.

As if in slow motion, Phibrizzo's eyes moved to

Amelia.

"You surprised me," he teased lightly. "A Ra Tilt with no warning? If I'd been a low-ranking demon, I'd have been done for." He flashed his teeth. "Good thing I'm not!"

Amelia audibly swallowed. "It can't be," she breathed.

It was bad enough that he'd brushed off her attack with a smile, but it was a lot worse when that spell was the strongest in Shamanic Magic. A human can't control a Shamanic spell any stronger than Ra Tilt, and it can blow away a normal opponent or, say, a low-ranking brass demon or something in a heartbeat. Phibrizzo was a top-rank Mazoku, but she'd hit him head-on when he hadn't expected it.

Ladies and gentlemen, we were screwed.

"Where was I?" Phibrizzo turned back to Gourry, his wavy hair brushing against his cheek. "Right. I'd like you to come with me to a stage I've prepared."

Gourry lowered his head slightly, his eyes still on Phibrizzo. "And if I refuse?" he asked. The Sword of Light immediately swelled brighter.

Phibrizzo seemed unimpressed. "Talk is cheap," he responded dismissively. "Threatening is one thing, but actually *doing* something is another." He raised his pale right hand and snapped his fingers.

The lit blade of Gourry's sword vanished.

Gourry practically jumped. “What?!” he shouted.

Since I was on the ground, my mouth opened so wide that it actually touched the dirt. I wanted to yell some sort of denial, but all that came out of me was a weird croak-squeak.

He can do that?!

“That,” Phibrizzo said evenly, “is not for human hands.” He snapped again.

Dozens of black tentacles suddenly sprouted from the Sword of Light. Before I could blink the tentacles wrapped around Gourry’s entire body

“HUH?!” I finally managed to cry. I heard my shout of surprise echoed by everyone else.

I’d never seen, or heard, or even *fathomed* that that sort of crap could come out of the Sword of Light’s hilt. Even Gourry looked shocked, and he owned the thing. He struggled ineffectually against the tightly wrapped tentacles.

“‘The Sword of Light’ is a name you humans probably pulled out of a hat.” Phibrizzo’s voice dropped to a serious, careful tone. “That object’s true name is Goln Nova. It’s one of the five weapons of Dark Star, Demon Lord of another world.”

I suddenly found it hard to breathe.

Demon Lord of another world.

Memories started flooding through my mind. When I’d bought Xelloss’ talismans off of him, he’d mentioned a few names. Dark

Star, Demon Lord of another world, was one of them.

"That sword was brought into this world some way or another, don't ask me how. It eventually fell into human hands." Phibrizzo shook his head. "It may have the form of a sword, but it's a portion of Dark Star—a part of his existence. Since that practically makes it a demon, it's more similar to me than to you humans, and I can align it with myself more easily."

Phibrizzo leveled his gaze at me. "It was a Demon Lord's weapon to begin with, Lina Inverse. That's why you were able to infuse Dragon Slave, and *that spell*, into the blade above the limits of your capacity." He paused. "Then again," he added, "if you used *that spell* perfectly, it would be too much even for Goln Nova."

A little bit of good, old-fashioned hate started to swirl around with the alarm inside me. I glared at Hellmaster with all the malice I could project.

He raised an eyebrow. "Have you realized what I want you to do?" he asked. "Even if you have, you're in no condition to do it right away—and I don't expect you to go along with my plan so easily, either. So this is what we'll do."

In a particularly infuriating example of his attitude, Phibrizzo calmly gestured to the wrapped-up Gourry.

"I'm taking him with me to my city of Sairaag."

The breath caught in my throat. “Wait!” I tried to cry, but before I could get the full word out, a weird zapping noise filled the air.

ZZZZZ!

Phibrizzo and Gourry vanished into thin air.

“G-Gourry!” I shouted and as I fought to my feet. I couldn’t get all the way up before dizziness suddenly grabbed me so badly that I fell back to the ground.

That son of a … ARGH!

I figured that Phibrizzo had probably used his power over Golin Nova to pull Gourry along for a ride across space. That meant they were on their way to Sairaag City in the Raizel Empire, just like he’d said.

But he’d called it “my city.” What did *that* mean?

In the aftermath of everything that had happened, the sudden absence of Phibrizzo and Gourry made Dragon’s Peak disturbingly quiet. We stared at the empty air, shock filling the silence between us.

“What’s going on?” Amelia finally whispered. The breeze picked up her voice and carried it off into the sky.

★★★

I had a dream that night. I couldn’t remember it at all after I woke up. It was frightening, maybe, or sad… but whatever it was, I rose in my bed the next morning on an impulse I didn’t really understand. I brought a finger to my cheek.

It was wet.

So it hadn't been good. Since I had no memory of the dream, all that remained of it were the tears on my face.

White daylight had begun to creep into the darkened room through the wooden window shutters. I blinked my blurry eyes and stared at the lines of light.

Morning, huh?

I sighed.

Still feeling sluggish for some reason, I slowly got out of bed.

After the whole incident of the day before, Zel, Amelia, and I had left Dragon's peak and found an inn at a nearby village. I must've been exhausted, because I'd skipped supper and collapsed into bed. I hadn't even moved in my sleep—I woke up on my side exactly as I'd fallen.

I dragged myself out of bed and down to the dining room on the first floor. Zel and Amelia were already at the table; it looked like they'd been waiting for me. I unconsciously started looking around for Gourry.

Get real, my mind snapped after a second. *He's not gonna be here, Lina.*

I let my eyes drop to the floor. Murmuring a very insincere "good morning" to Amelia and Zel, I took a chair and sat down. I only ordered a double portion morning set from the menu—that's how much I'd lost my appetite.

After a minute, Amelia cleared her throat. “Are you feeling okay?” she asked nervously.

I forced a small smile. “I’m fine. It looks like I slept like crap, though—I had a weird dream.”

Amelia pursed her lips. “That’s good,” she said vaguely, which was an unusual tone for her.

Nobody said anything after that. A waiter came by with our food, and I dug into my breakfast. I was hiding my face in a long sip of tea when Zelgadiss finally broke our self-imposed silence.

“What are you going to do?” he asked flatly.

Amelia gasped. “Mister Zelgadiss!” she exclaimed, apparently bothered that he dared to ask.

“Being depressed won’t help anything,” he said. I lowered my cup a little, and I could see his eyes boring into me. “Whatever we’re going to do, we’d better get on it as soon as possible.”

Depressed? I wondered. I hadn’t thought I was depressed, but apparently the two of them had noticed something. I set down my tea.

“I know,” I told him. “I mean… I know that.” A small sigh escaped my lips as I tapped the table. “Let’s just think about this calmly, all right? There are a lot of things to consider.”

I looked up at both of them. “We’re going up against Hellmaster Phibrizzo. He literally tore Chaos Dragon Gaav apart without breaking a sweat, and a surprise Ra Tilt didn’t even scratch him. The guy’s a *monster*. I could probably fire Dragon Slaves off at him all

day and he'd brush them off like mosquito bites.

"That means the only way I can save Gourry is if I go to Hellmaster and do whatever it is he wants me to do. But he didn't even promise me Gourry in one piece if I do that, so even that might only put Gourry in more danger." I let out a breath. "He's safe as long as he's a hostage. The smart thing to do would be to avoid Sairaag for the rest of my life."

I let that soak in for a minute. Since Zel and Amelia only stared at me in silence, I eventually flashed them a pained smile.

"But I can't do that, either. He made himself my guardian, or whatever he calls it. I'm not gonna just leave him there."

Amelia sat up. "Then …"

I nodded. "We'll try Sairaag."

Satisfaction flooded Amelia's face. "That's my Lina!" she said with a wide smile. "Even though your deeds usually seem evil, indiscriminately gluttonous, short-tempered, and ruthless, you come through when it counts."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Are you trying to pick a fight?"

"You've proven that, deep down, you're not evil!" She paused. "Although I wouldn't call you good, either."

I rolled my eyes. *I'll give her points for honesty, I guess.* Amelia slapped her fist into her palm. "Now that that's settled, let's go to Sairaag! There's no time to—" "Hey!" I snapped, quickly waving my hands in front of her face. She was well on her way to Self-Absorbed Righteousness, and I had to nip that in the bud. "Calm down,

Amelia! I'm going alone."

Amelia's smile dropped as the haze of Justice faded from her eyes. "Huh?" she blurted. "What do you mean, 'alone'? Like … by yourself?"

"Yes, by myself." I rubbed my temples. "It looks like Hellmaster's only after me. Nobody else has to get involved."

"That's true," Zel admitted with a murmur.

Amelia whipped to him with saucer eyes. "Mister Zelgadiss!" she cried incredulously for the second time that morning.

Unlike Amelia, Zel replied with an "inside" voice. "What could you and I accomplish by going with her, Amelia? Our spells won't even scratch Hellmaster—at worst, we'll be slowing her down."

Amelia moved her eyes to the table. "I guess," she said. "But…"

"I said 'at worst.' " Zel looked away, and I swear he colored a little. "I didn't say we should let her go alone. We just have to make sure that we aren't in the way."

I stared at him in confusion. *Did he just embarrass himself by saying that?* I wondered. Who blushes at their own words?

Amelia immediately perked up. "That's right!" she declared, slamming a fist on the table. "Even against an invincible foe, a path will open to courageous seekers of Justice!"

If only life worked like that. I sighed and leaned back in my chair.

No matter what courage or genius or "Amelia feelings" we

barged in with, we were still pretty much toast. Milgazia was the elder of the Gold Dragons, and even he'd stayed back when Hellmaster had grabbed Gourry. But what was I gonna say? Amelia and Zel knew the risks.

I guess it's a team project, after all.

"We still have something to clear up," Zelgadiss added coolly. His gaze locked on me, and I knew the instant he opened his mouth what he was going to say.

"Do you, or do you not, know what Hellmaster Phibrizzo wants you for?" He crossed his arms. "After his speech earlier, I figured you might—"

"Stop!" Amelia interrupted.

Zel glanced at her. "What?"

Amelia shook her head. "Whatever he's planning, I don't want to hear it."

Huh?

Zelgadiss and I stared at her in surprise. What was wrong with her this time?

"I don't want to hear it," Amelia repeated, her mouth a tight line.

"Amelia," I said carefully. "Why not? Isn't truth the foundation of Justice to you?"

"That's exactly why I don't want to hear it." Amelia looked down. "Whatever Hellmaster's planning, it can't be good. Hearing the details might compel me to stop you by any means necessary—

including abandoning Mister Gourry. So I just don't … I don't want to know this time."

I stopped at that. Zel, finally, gave a weak smile.

"Fine," he said. "Then I don't want to hear, either." He let out a breath. "I doubt I could do anything about Hellmaster's plan even if I *did* know."

The whole "see no evil" thing coming from Amelia and Zelgadiss was pretty weird. It made me uncomfortable.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

Amelia gave me a bright smile. "This isn't about right or wrong," she answered. "We're all going to go save Mister Gourry—that's enough, right?"

I paused. After a second, I swallowed and looked away.

To be honest … it was the first time in my life I was really happy to have friends.

★★★

Sairaag City.

It's a city that is—well, *was*, near the center of the Raizel Empire. It prospered for a long time as the "City of the Sorcerery" until Demon Beast Zanaffar destroyed the place. That left it with its second, more notorious name: the "City of Ghosts."

Sairaag eventually recovered and become a bustling metropolis, but a more recent tragedy had torn the city down yet again. The incident had involved me personally. I knew the city was a wasteland

because I'd seen it with my own eyes; all that remained of Sairaag at that point was a single, gigantic tree.

I had no idea why Phibrizzo wanted me to go to Sairaag of all places, but I figured it would make sense once I got there. Since we were in Dilse, we were a good twenty days' march away. The only good news was that the path would be clear with Chaos Dragon destroyed.

There was only one thing left to do.

"Mega Brand!"

KA-BOOM!

My spell lit the darkness, sending screaming bandits in every direction.

I let out a long, contented sigh as I cracked my knuckles. After traveling for three days, I needed an outlet for all my stress. Would *you* be able to sleep, wondering if you'd get your lug-headed buddy home safe without going along with an insanely powerful demon's Plan of Mysterious Evil?

After spending several nights staring at the ceiling, I'd finally decided to do something about it.

I'd slipped out of our inn, searched the nearby forest for a bandit hideout, and had proceeded to blast the hell out of it. Bullying bandits is the perfect remedy for a maiden's wavering heart.

I was sick of being hated, so it was time to beat on somebody with no rights who would get me the love of the townsfolk and some sweet free contraband.

Circumstances may change, but my methods never will.

"AAGH!" a nearby bandit cried from the ground. He covered his face protectively. "Who are you? Why're you doing this?!"

I wanted to tell him that bullying bandits is my sacred duty as a human being, but I wasn't sure he'd get it. I tried something more straightforward. "I've had a lot on my mind," I explained. "And you're here. Comprendé?"

The bandit's eyes bugged out of his head. "A lot on your *mind*?" he repeated. "You're crazy!"

I scowled at him. "I was being honest. And if you didn't want to deal with crazy people, you shouldn't have become a bandit!" I put my hands on my hips. "If you don't wanna get pounded any harder, bring me your loot. Now."

The bandit gasped. "B-but… that's cruel! "he cried.

"You do it to everyone else all the time! Now get moving!"

The bandit cursed. Since bandits are usually all about the do-unto-others-before-they-do-unto-you, screwing them over usually throws them for a loop. He paused a second, then changed his expression a little.

Oh, no, you little twerp.

"We, uh, get it," he mumbled. "Just don't kill us, okay? We'll bring it out, just give us a—"

I ignored the obvious lie and starting chanting my next spell as I whipped around. Sure enough, a lone bowman in the distance had an

arrow aimed right at me.

Bah. I'd felt his bloodlust and had noticed the talking bandit suddenly regain his nerve. Did those guys seriously think they could pull the wool over *my* eyes?

I was about to release my spell at the bowman when something unexpected happened.

The bowman's chest was ripped apart.

I blinked. *Huh?!*

The man dropped like a stone. The night breeze suddenly went heavy with the smell of blood.

I hadn't done it—my spell was still inactivated. And the attack had definitely come from behind the guy.

Before I could think any more on the subject, a mass of light flew out of a thicket and into the bandits nearby Heads and chests were crushed as bandits piled up on the ground.

"Wh-what's goin' on?!" I heard from the bandit behind me as he audibly shuffled backward. I ignored him as I quickly searched the area for presences.

An ominous darkness emerged from the trees under the light of the crescent moon. The area was filled with a sharp, cold bloodlust unlike anything bandits could give off.

My eyes widened. *No way.*

"I've found you, Lina Inverse," a voice drifted by on the wind.

I knew that voice. I couldn't see where it came from, but I knew that voice.

"Rashatt?!" I shouted.

"Indeed," he responded from nowhere.

General Rashatt. He paled in comparison to Xelloss, Gaav, and Phibrizzo, but as one of Gaav's retainers, he was still a high-ranking Mazoku. The last time I'd seen him had been on Dragon's Peak, when he'd chased after a wounded Xelloss. Because so much had happened since then (out of sight, out of mind), I'd actually forgotten about him.

"Well," I called into the darkness as I kept searching the area. "I forgot you were on the Peak after I stopped sensing you. Does this mean you finished off Xelloss?"

"I did not defeat him," he said, an odd lack of regret in his voice.

"So why are you crawling out of the woodwork now?"

"I'm sure you can imagine," he replied. His tone was condescending, but it had the edge of a threat to it. "You and Xelloss made a fine mess of things. Thanks to you, Sir Raltaak and —thanks to Hellmaster's trap—my liege, Lord Chaos Dragon Gaav … were both destroyed."

I stopped. Based on his words and the way he said them, it sounded like he was blaming me. Like, *blaming me* blaming me. Vengeance-worthy blaming me.

I raised my eyebrows. "Wait a second," I called. "You didn't … come here to get revenge on me or something stupid like that, did

you?

"And if I said I was?"

My jaw dropped. "You can't be serious! Phibrizzo's the bad guy here—he planned everything! Go take your revenge out on him!"

I desperately wanted to pin all responsibility on Hellmaster Phibrizzo. To be blunt, fighting Rashatt was a fight I didn't want to have—the guy wasn't called "General" for nothing. Even if he didn't hold a candle to the absolute monsters I'd been dealing with, several Dragon Slaves still probably wouldn't take Rashatt down. With Xelloss off somewhere and Hellmaster chilling in Sairaag, I wasn't confident I could fight Rashatt by myself and win.

"Revenge against Hellmaster?" Rashatt repeated after a moment. His voice had quieted a little. "Perhaps, but I would likely be destroyed myself if I were to assail him. Right now, there is but one thing I can do to take revenge upon him—I must smash the core of his scheme."

Crap!

"W-wait!" I shouted. "That's not—"

RIP!

With a violent sound, space itself seemed to close around me as numerous points of light appeared. I leapt backward as fast as I could.

The darkness was torn, causing the lights to flash as another sound roared through the air. I'd just barely avoided being flattened.

“I expected you to avoid something so meager.”

Rashatt’s voice suddenly came very clearly from my side. I whipped my head to sec a human silhouette emerge from the darkness. He was wearing his dragon scale armor, and a naked sword gleamed in his hand.

General Rashatt fixed his gaze on me, clearly not interested in the screaming bandits that escaped around us.

“Still,” he said lowly. “I have something you will *not* escape. Moldirag!

The instant he shouted, I felt a seething bloodlust pop up behind me.

Somebody else is here?! I thought frantically as I leapt to the side. Needless to say, I was starting to get worried.

light tore through the darkness and into the ground where I’d been standing. I looked up to see a lone figure floating in the sky. It looked like a human woman— from the waist up, anyway. Her face seemed almost fake in its emotionless beauty, and her long, black hair stood out in sharp contrast to her almost transparent white skin.

From the waist *down* she was a tree. A clutch of tangled tree roots extended from her abdomen in all directions.

Seeing a white monster like that floating in the darkness was creepy as hell. If I’d seen her as a kid, she would’ve given me nightmares.

I swallowed. Moldirag (or whatever her name was) turned her expressionless face to me.

“Look at that,” I murmured to Rashatt, trying to sound sarcastic. “You actually found yourself a date at this hour.” Moldirag ignored the joke, but Rashatt gave me a calm smile.

“I can still call upon numerous brass demons and lesser demons,” he explained. “Some enjoy using them in numbers, but I personally believe in quality over quantity. You will not escape Moldirag.”

Quality over quantity. I wasn’t sure which was worse.

From the looks of it, Moldirag was about as strong as the demons Dugld and Gduza I’d fought earlier—a Mazoku I could take down in a one-on-one fight. But with Rashatt doing the fighting and Moldirag on support duty, I wasn’t even sure I could run away.

Now what?

Rashatt suddenly shifted his feet. “Prepare yourself, Lina Inverse!” he cried as a number of light balls emerged around him.

“Ugh!” I made a heavy sideways leap and circled behind the nearest large tree.

BOOM!

When Rashatt’s energy balls smashed into the tree shielding me, I ran out and continued chanting my own spell.

Unfortunately, I didn’t get very far—the darkness in front of me suddenly warped to release the swaying white form of Moldirag.

Yes, she’d jumped across space. And yes, I’d been expecting that.

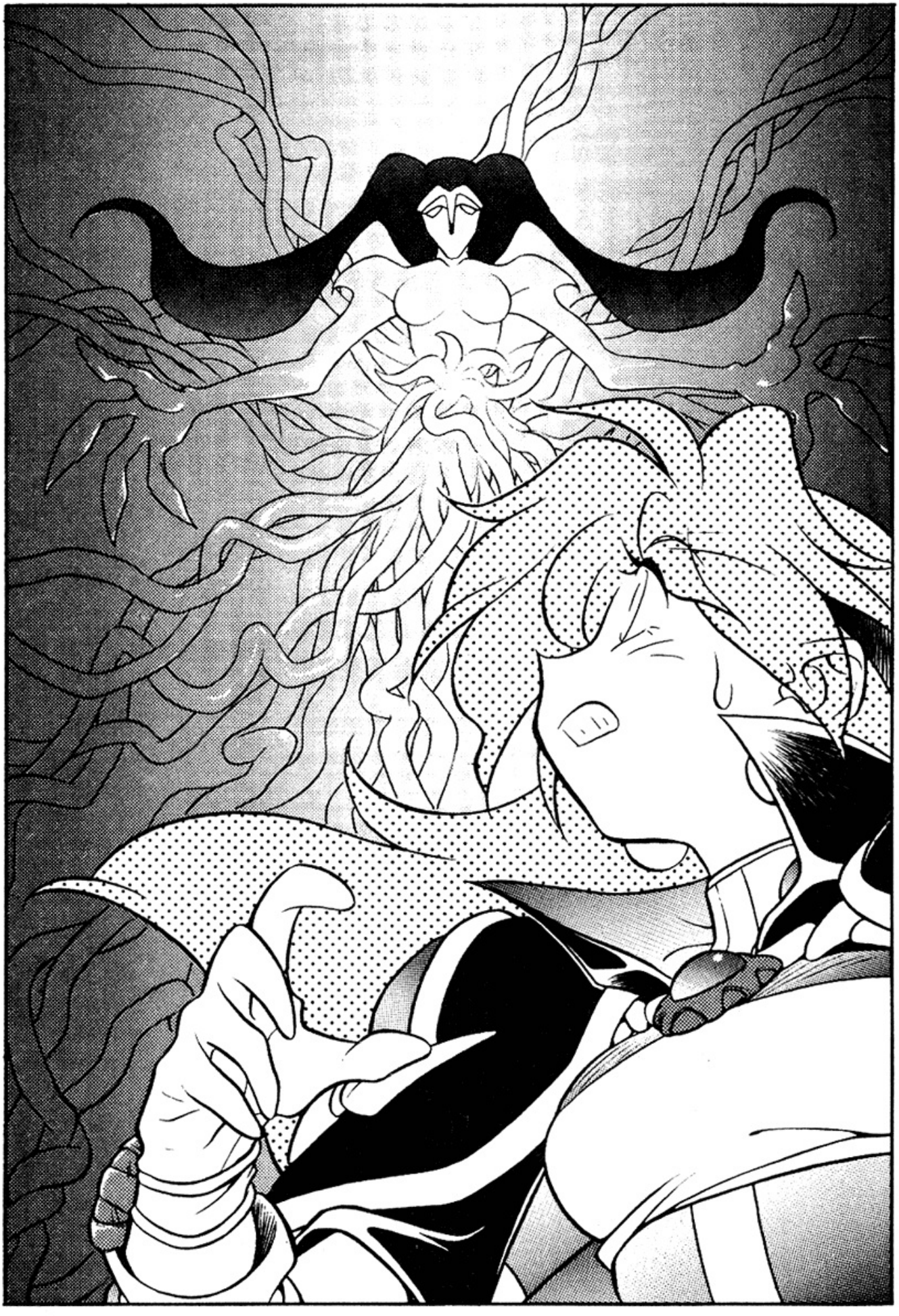
I finished chanting my spell and released it the second she appeared. “Elmekia Lance!” I shouted.

The Elmekia Lance inflicts damage directly to an opponent’s spirit, so I knew it would at least hurt her pretty badly. I planned to cut across the area as soon as she intelligently dodged.

She never did. The lack of expression still frozen on her face, Moldirag shot a lance of light that easily cut mine down.

My blood went cold. *Uh-oh.*

Another lance immediately emerged from Moldirag.



I didn't have time to chant a spell; I just changed the direction of my dash as fast as I could.

"Give up!" Rashatt called from behind me as I began chanting my next spell. I swerved again just in time to avoid a set of exploding lights that went off by my feet.

Through dodging and weaving, I managed to avoid a wave of attacks and put some distance between Rashatt and me. And just as I expected, that was Moldirag's cue to appear right in front of me.

It was exactly what I'd been waiting for.

I released my spell at her. "Dragon Slave!" I cried.

The Dragon Slave, as you probably know by now, draws its power from the Demon Lord of my world: Ruby Eye Shabranigdu. It was sure to either kill Moldirag or at least injure her enough to let me to finish her off. Crimson light blew out of the darkness to converge on Moldirag.

Something roared like a wild animal from behind me. The same instant I heard that, the Dragon Slave's light dissolved into the darkness.

I stared at the empty air in shock and horror. *No way*, I thought. *I really needed that one!*

"You mustn't do that!" Rashatt shouted victoriously.

I clenched my fists so hard, my knuckles turned white.

That stupid Rashatt had put out my precious Dragon Slave! It wasn't that weird for a high-ranking demon like him, but… you

don’t do that to Lina Inverse, dammit! It’s just not right!

I’d jumped out of the frying pan and into the inferno. I couldn’t beat Moldirag and I couldn’t run, so that left me with one option: dying.

My mind raced for a better idea. A Ragna Blade would definitely work on the two demons, but I was screwed if they dodged it—especially since it would deplete my magic energy and leave me as weak as a kitten. So what did that leave me with?

Moldirag shot another lance at me. Like I’d been doing, I altered my course to dodge, but that also made me step on something wet. The ground slipped from under me and the world went into slow motion.

Not… now!

Before I even hit the ground, I managed to grit my teeth and twist my body to the right. It wasn’t quite good enough.

I choked as a burning shockwave ran up my left leg. With my balance completely thrown, I fell to the ground like a sack of bricks.

A wet pain washed over me. I knew my leg had to be hurt pretty badly; my boot had been turned to mostly ash around the ankle. I couldn’t feel or move anything below that, which is never a good sign.

I heard footsteps. I looked up as Rashatt approached, his steps slow and deliberate on the littered floor of the woods.

“It seems you’ve reached your end at last, Lina Inverse.” He stopped a short distance away from me, his eyes on my ankle. “You

won't be moving any farther on that leg."

Moldirag silently floated a little ways away. She was as silent as ever, and it was creepier than ever.

"While you are formidable for a human," Rashatt admitted, "this is the end you were destined for. A peaceful death would be—"

Rashatt suddenly stopped mid-speech. He whipped his head to the white demon floating nearby.

"Moldirag!" he shouted.

"Ra Tilt!" Amelia cried.

Amelia's fantastic timing (which was becoming more common those days) wasn't quite good enough. Moldirag melted into the darkness right before she could go up in blue flames.

Rashatt clucked his tongue and turned back to me. "It seems we have uninvited guests," he said lowly. "You will escape with your life for now, but time yet remains. I doubt you will arrive at Sairaag in proper health.

His villainous declaration complete, General Rashatt vanished into the darkness.

Good riddance, I thought bitterly. I let out the breath I'd unconsciously been holding. "Lina!" Amelia cried.

I lifted my eyes from my hurt ankle Amelia and Zelgadiss came crashing through a thicket, calling but as they did so. "Are you okay?!" was Amelia's cry.

I rubbed some dirt from my cheek as she ran up. "My leg got

pretty trashed," I explained. "But, um … what are you guys doing here?"

"Anyone would've heard all this noise so close to the village." Amelia grimaced as she looked at my leg, then began chanting a Resurrection spell.

That sent a clear message—my wound was as bad as it looked. Recovery is the spell for normal injuries; Resurrection is for everything worse.

"The man who vanished before we got here." Zelgadiss looked over to the empty space. "That was Rashatt, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "He said he wanted revenge for Gaav," I muttered.

Zel raised his eyebrows. "Revenge?"'.he repeated.

I shrugged. "I guess he's an honorable guy. For a demon."

Amelia made her mouth a tight line. "It sure sounds that way He brought that white 'Moldirag' Mazoku with him?"

Zel paused. "I guess I should say 'I see,' " he said after a moment.

"Yeah," I mumbled as I looked grimly up at the night sky "And it looks like our trip just got a whole lot harder.

★★★

Horse-drawn wagons clattered along the wide road of Lualdo City. The area was packed with crowds of pushy people. Shops lined the road and the cries of ware sellers overlapped each other noisily.

Lualdo is the southernmost city of the Kingdom of Dilse, a trading city close to the border of the Kingdom of Ralteeg. I planned for us to pass through Lualdo to Ralteeg, enter the Raizel Empire, and finally make our way to Sairaag. Temporarily entering another country may *sound* like the scenic route, but it's the shortest way to Sairaag. And no, I'm not being sarcastic.

"Okay," I said, turning from the bustle to my partners. "Let's lodge here for the day."

Amelia's eyes turned into dinner plates. "WHAT?!" she cried in her especially loud tone. "Mister Gourry in still in the hands of the enemy, Lina! And with Rashatt after us, we don't have the time to take a break!" She pointed randomly toward the sky in determination. "Rashatt can't hurt us in Sairaag—we have to get there as soon as possible!"

I cleared my throat and tried to pretend I didn't know her. I knew where she was coming from, but all that screeching and posing in a crowd was completely embarrassing. I sent Zelgadiss a glance that said, "Pretend you don't know her either."

Zelgadiss ignored me and instead bent to whisper in her ear. "Hold on," he told her, maybe in response to her screaming or to the fact that she grabbed me with her free hand. "Sairaag will definitely protect us from Rashatt, but that's only because we'll have to face Phibrizzo there."

Hellmaster's name wiped the determined look off of Amelia's face. "Oh," she murmured, dropping my sleeve.

None of us liked Rashatt, but he was preferable to Phibrizzo. We

were left to choose between Bad and Worse.

"I know we have to hurry," I told her. "And I know it's early in the day, but think of it this way—it'll be nightfall before we reach the next village or town, and camping out in the open is like putting up a sign that says 'come kill us' and just waiting for Rashatt to show. He'll be all over us, and fast."

I shook my head. "And even if he doesn't come after us, we'll be so tired from the extra walking and crappy sleep that we'll start slowing down. That's not good, either."

"I suppose, but …" Amelia looked at me in surprise and disappointment.

"Lina," she said quietly. "Aren't you worried about Mister Gourry?"

For some reason, I felt the need to look away and scratch my cheek. "Well, I answered, "I came close to killing Gourry dozens of times, but I always got the feeling that killing him wouldn't actually *kill* him. I don't know if Phibrizzo *could* kill the guy, y'know? And it feels like Gourry's safe." I paused. "For some reason."

Amelia, strangely, broke into a faint smile. "I see," she commented. "Then I guess we're lodging here for today."

"Right." I ignored her weirdly gentle agreement and started scanning the area. "First, we need to find a place to

sleep. Then we need supplies and—" I stopped cold. For a second, in the crowd of the people, I could've sworn I…

"What is it, Lina?"

Amelia's question snapped me out of my concentration. I abruptly turned to her.

"Maybe I'm crazy," I said, "or maybe he's got a twin. But I think I just saw him over there."

"Saw who?"

"A familiar face," I answered as I turned back to the crowds.

"Saw who, Lina?!"

I paused, then croaked out two words: "Hellmaster Phibrizzo."

"WHAT?!"

I know, I thought. *You took the word out of my mouth*.

"But … that's not possible!" Amelia cried. "He said he'd be waiting at Sairaag! Why would he be here?!"

"I might just be seeing things," I admitted. "It doesn't make sense that …" As the figure once again passed my line of vision, I felt the words die in my throat.

He was only visible for a second, through a gap in the crowd. But there was no mistaking that dark-haired, effeminate boy shuffling by in his black mantle.

And his eyes, bright with a piercing, freezing light, briefly met mine.

Phibrizzo. The boyish Mazoku once again vanished into the waves of people.

"Over here!" I shouted as I ran off in his direction. I pushed my

way through the people until I'd reached where I'd seen him, but all the speed I'd gained from shoving wasn't good enough—there was no sign left of Hellmaster.

Zelgadiss caught up to me a minute later. His gaze darted in all directions. "He was really here?" he asked.

I swallowed. "No," I said, although I didn't sound convincing. "I guess it was just… someone else."

It *had* to be someone else. Right? The boy had looked exactly like Phibrizzo, but I'd also only seen him for a split second. And he'd already—

"Over there!" Amelia suddenly shouted, pointing toward one side of the road.

A small person in a black mantle made his way onto a lane off the main street.

He wasn't getting away again.

"After him!" I declared, shoving my way through the crowd again. Hellmaster or not, I had to find out!

The lane was a small alley spaced between two buildings, only wide enough for a single person. The high brick walls on either side buried the lane in darkness. Since there was faint light filtering in from somewhere beyond the entrance, there was probably something at the other end of the alley.

The small silhouette, like a black dot against the light up ahead, shrank as it walked away from us. Even from his back, I could tell—that kid was Hellmaster Phibrizzo.

“Wait!” I ran into the lane, but the black silhouette kept walking. I chased after him with Amelia and Zel hot on my heels. In the narrow alley, my shoulder guards were kinda in the way, but I didn’t have time to take them off.

What’s he doing?! my mind spun as I ran. *It’s not like he can’t sense us!* If the kid really *was* Phibrizzo, he knew it was us, and him not turning around to kill us or make a stronger-than-thou speech didn’t make much sense. What was going on?

The figure continued into another lane that branched off to the right. We followed as he cut across the thin and darkened alley.

No matter how slowly he walked, we still couldn’t catch up … which meant, at the very least, that we weren’t chasing a human. We hadn’t gotten much farther before space suddenly expanded in front of us.

I slid to a halt, my eyes wide. We were suddenly in an open area big enough to fit a small house. It didn’t look like a consciously constructed plaza or anything; the place was surrounded by high, windowless brick walls that blocked out much of the sunlight.

The boy was gone. I scanned the place and even checked for the lane that stretched ahead, but no dice.

Zel sighed from beside me. “So he vanished,” he muttered.

“Maybe. But…”

Something about the situation still wasn’t right. It was easy (and predictable) for Phibrizzo to disappear by jumping across space, but if he’d wanted to avoid us, why hadn’t he done that earlier? Why

had he lured us into that area?

I didn't have to wait long for an answer.

"It's good that you've come, Lina Inverse," boomed a voice from the lane we'd just left. It was a bodiless voice I was really starting to hate.

Dammit!

I whipped around.

The boy in a black mantle stood there behind us, and he sure *looked* like Hellmaster Phibrizzo. But the voice that came out of his mouth was a lot older and more pretentious.

"I was certain you'd follow me if I took on this form," Rashatt's voice said from Phibrizzo's mouth. His form shuddered, then wavered slightly.

His body transformed into its usual shape a second later. Rashatt leveled his gaze at me, the faint light reflecting off his dragon scale armor.

I groaned deep in my throat. "I can't believe we fell for that," I muttered.

It was an amateur's mistake. For a high-ranking Mazoku, a human form is just a disguise—most of them can probably take whatever form they want. Turning into a little boy had probably been a cakewalk for Rashatt.

Nice job, Lina. Get your head out of your ass!

Rashatt cleared his throat. "I was interrupted before," he said.

“But you cannot escape from *this* place.”

Based on the fact that running back down the lane would leave us open to whatever he sent flying, I was inclined to believe him. We were also a.) in a city I was hoping to not destroy with giant spells, b.) going against the Dragon General, and c.) probably seconds away from a surprise attack by Moldirag.

Summed up, it meant we’d all die.

We had no choice but to try fighting. Amelia and Zel had already caught on, because we all began chanting spells at the same time.

“Now,” Rashatt called, his voice echoing in the wide area. “Let us begin!”

General Rashatt, He Who Obstructs Our Path

Hissing like a cobra, Rashatt poised his sword in his hand.

Since he was pretty far away, I figured he was just trying to look intimidating. But he wasn't posing for nothing.

CHOOM!

A single swing of the sword sent some sort of shockwave at us. It tore through the air as we all leapt in different directions.

The shockwave ripped through the space where we'd been standing and collided with one of the brick walls. It vanished once it hit the surface; the brick wall didn't look damaged, but I knew a human body wouldn't be so lucky.

Our turn. I spread my feet and released my spell.

"Dam Brass!"

The spell Dam Brass transforms magical energy into a destructive oscillation wave. I knew the spell would do squat to the spiritual body of a pure demon like Rashatt, but he wasn't my target —the nearest brick wall was.

To be honest, I had only two spells that I figured could take General Rashatt down. One of them was the Ragna Blade, which had cut through Chaos Dragon Gaav. But it was in the shape of a sword, which meant I had to fight Rashatt in close quarters; I was afraid he'd escape into the sky while I set the spell in motion and I'd end up wasting my magical energy.

That was why I was going to bust a wall, make him think I was escaping, and then nail him with a close-range Ragna Blade when he chased me indoors.

Unfortunately, my excellent plan never got off the ground. The Dam Brass I'd released hit the brick wall and broke apart, leaving the wall unscathed.

"What the hell?!" I blurted.

I took a step back in shock.

"That won't work, Lina Inverse!" Rashatt declared with sneer. "Have you not yet noticed? This place is already

part of my ward! You cannot damage a single blade of grass in this city, so attempting an escape is futile!"

I ground my teeth together. *He wants to finish us here*, I thought, as if that fact had ever been in question.

Still, Rashatt's words gave me another idea. I couldn't hurt the city, huh? That meant I could use the Dragon Slave! Unless … that would kill *us*, since we were packed pretty tight there. Maybe murder-suicide wasn't the way to go.

Amelia released her spell while I mulled over possibilities.

"Ra Tilt!"

Rashatt's form trembled slightly right before it was engulfed in blue flame. As the blue light swallowed him, the general's body suddenly shattered.

Amelia gave a start. "I got him?!" she exclaimed, not sounding

very convinced.

Like things were ever that easy. The air behind her shuddered, and Rashatt appeared there with his sword raised.

Crap! I thought frantically. Rashatt had left behind a piece of his spirit body as a decoy while his main body jumped across space. He wasn't the first demon to use that trick.

He aimed to bring the sword down on her head.

"Ra Tilt!"

Maybe Rashatt hadn't been expecting that one, because Zel's Ra Tilt totally nailed him.

"GAAAAH!"

Amelia quickly leapt out of the area as the blue flames roared. After a second, the blue light vanished, leaving a pained and very pissed-off Rashatt glaring daggers at Zel.

"You impudent fool!" he snarled. His face twisted in anger, Rashatt swung his sword to release a shockwave straight at Zel.

Zel dodged easily enough. When his feet touched the ground again, the space behind him shuddered, and another one of our favorite demons tried a backstab attack.

Moldirag.

"What?" Zel blurted as he tried to regain his balance. He didn't have time to fix his footing before Moldirag spawned and released a clutch of magic arrows. The attack hit Zel head on.

Zelgadiss cried out and hit the ground. Although the hit wasn't fatal, it left him prone to Moldirag.

I wouldn't leave him to the mercies of a demonic tree.

"Ragna Blast!" I shouted, releasing my spell at Moldirag.

Moldirag hid her body in space the second before my spell could hit her. The magic pillar I'd created launched black plasma uselessly into the air.

"Great," I muttered. It had *looked* like Moldirag had timed her retreat to get away from my spell, but it had been a little too fast for that. Maybe she'd just been taught to attack-vanish-attack? It was an infuriating battle tactic, but I had to admit that it worked. I had no idea where the Mazoku would pop up next—and considering what she'd done to Zel, she could wreak some serious surprise damage.

That means I can't read her movements and plan an attack. How do you plan for an opponent who appears randomly, anyway? With the time it took for us to chant our spells, reacting when she appeared wouldn't be fast enough. I really, really missed Gourry and his Sword of Light at that moment.

All things said and done, I had to go for Rashatt with the Ragna Blade—and I had to do it fast. I borrowed power from my Amplification talismans and began to chant the spell.

"... Release the heavenly bonds

The frozen blade of hollow darkness;

Beside my power, beside my flesh,

Let us together walk the path of Destruction

That even the souls of the gods may be smashed …”

It was the incomplete version of the Ragna Blade. The completed one was stronger but a *lot* more draining, and I didn’t want to risk being completely depleted if I missed. Besides, the draining from even the incomplete spell was plenty bad enough, and it probably had as much power and time on it as I needed.

I sprinted toward Rashatt. It was finally time to tear the guy a new one.

“What?!” Rashatt cried, noticing me just a little too late. By the time he’d turned in my direction, I was practically on top of him.

“Ragna Blade!” I shouted.

A black blade appeared between the palms of my open hands. Already at point-blank range, I continued my charge at Rashatt while slicing a severe upward cut.

The bastard dodged it. Argh!

As close as I was, I’d expected him to parry—but the general actually leapt sideways and managed to evade me. Dodging when I was that close proved that he was faster than I thought. Probably intimidated by my blade, Rashatt quickly put some distance between us.

I decided to try an experiment. Keeping the Ragna Blade activated, I ran past where Rashatt had been and sliced into the brick wall.

ZMM!

The blade easily sliced through the ward Rashatt was using to protect it.

Gotcha.

"Impossible!" Rashatt yelled. "What have you done to my ward?!"

I sliced again, this time cutting open a hole big enough for someone to walk through. I could still follow my plan—I could still get him indoors. Even so, using the Ragna Blade was sucking my strength up pretty fast; I only had enough energy to cast one more incomplete one, and I wouldn't have it long. It was time to do or die.

One would be more than enough.

Rashatt suddenly jumped backward, putting even more space between us. The guy looked livid.

"To think someone like you could break my ward!" he cried. "You little … very well, Lina Inverse!" He clenched his fists. "We'll settle this next time!"

And with that, Rashatt vanished. I stopped in surprise.

Huh?

We all stood there for a second, confused by Rashatt's sudden retreat.

Is it just me, I thought, *or was that completely random?* "Wh-what's going on?!" Amelia cried. "Where'd he go?!"

Zelgadiss, still on the ground, rubbed a fist against his chin. He slowly got to his feet. “He retreated,” he muttered at last. “Unless that was a feint and he’s still hiding around here somewhere.” His gaze traveled around the area, his body still on guard.

I couldn’t sense Rashatt’s presence nearby, which meant he really had bolted. It was anti-climactic, but what else could I expect from such a loser?

“I think he’s gone, guys,” I said at last. I let out a heavy breath. “Now let’s get the hell out of here.”

★★★

“Mmm.” I made a small groan as I stabbed my wine-fried lamb chops. With my fork firmly embedded, I unenthusiastically brandished my knife.

It wasn’t that the food was bad. In fact, it was actually pretty decent—not a masterpiece, but definitely palatable. I just had other things on my mind.

Three days had passed since our fight in Lualdo City. Rashatt hadn’t attacked us since, so we’d made it to the Raizel Empire in decent time.

It was just… something about our recent travels was still nagging at me.

“What’s wrong?” Amelia asked as I reached across the table for a bite of steamed lobster with cream cheese. She stared at me over the table, her face partially blocked by a bottle.

I swallowed. “I’ve, uh … got a lot on my mind,” I said, stuffing

some carrots into my mouth to mix in with the words.

"Like?"

I sighed. "Mostly Rashatt," I explained. "He ran off pretty fast after I ruined his ward in Lualdo City. That just struck me as weird, y'know?"

Amelia bit into a potato. "He seems to attack and run a lot," she agreed with her mouth full. "But you said something a while ago about him trying to avoid hurting innocents."

"About that." I distractedly stabbed my fork. "Why are they even bothering? I mean, I know that *I'd* rather not accidentally kill random pedestrians, but I'm a sweetheart. And I'm a human, to boot."

Amelia and Zel exchanged looks. I knew what they wanted to say: "Why bring up this up now, Lina? We have other things to worry about, Lina. Why do you have to be so thorough and insightful, Lina?"

Amelia decided to actually contribute. "I thought they were trying to get dragons and elves as allies," she said. "So Chaos Dragon and his subordinates were trying to show the difference between themselves and the demons of Kataart."

"And Chaos Dragon didn't want to draw attention," Zelgadiss added. "He and his cronies knew that mass deaths would catch Hellmaster's eye. Still…" He shrugged and picked up his cup. "Rashatt does seem a bit more direct these days."

"Right?" And I still didn't feel much better. Yeah, Chaos Dragon

had had reasons to avoid killing humans other than me. But now …

A voice suddenly broke through my thoughts. “Miss Lina?!”

I blinked and turned around in my chair. Behind me, in the door of the restaurant, a familiar girl covered her mouth. She was about twenty; had long, black hair; and wore priestly robes dyed a light purple.

“Sylphiel?” I blurted.

Despite the fact that everybody and his brother had been sneaking up behind me lately, she was one of the last beings I’d expected to see.

But she sure beat another unexpected visit from Rashatt.

Sylphiel threaded her way to our table. “What are you doing here?” I asked as she approached. “Why are you in a place like this?”

For those of you who don’t remember, I’d first met Sylphiel in Sairaag and had traveled with her as far as Saillune.

The last memory I had of her was when she’d fainted after learning that princes could be as ugly as Phil.

I’m sure she, uh, hasn’t been unconscious since then.

Sylphiel frowned. “Why?” she repeated. “I heard that a number of nearby bandit groups were destroyed these past few days. And then when I arrived here, and people told me that a small-chested sorceress was eating this restaurant out of business … well, I thought I could find you here.”

I grimaced. “What are you doing in the *city*,” I clarified dryly. Those had been borderline fightin’ words, especially coming from someone as stupidly beautiful, articulate, graceful, and pleasant as Sylphiel.

“Oh. Well, before that.” She turned to Zelgadiss and nodded. “It’s good to see you again. I’m indebted to you for many things.”

He shrugged. “You look well. And you don’t have to be so formal.”

“I’m well thanks to you.” She shifted her gaze to Amelia. “And this is … ?”

“Amelia Wil Tesla Saillune,” Amelia announced. She rose from her seat and bowed formally.

“Thank you for your courtesy,” Sylphiel said, upping the conversation’s stiff-shirted pompousness to record levels. “I am called Sylphiel Nels Rahda …” She trailed off toward the end, her eyes going wide.

“Wait a moment.” She froze. “Miss Amelia Wil Tesla *Saillune?*”

This was sure to be good.

Amelia nodded. “That’s right.”

Sylphiel started to tremble. Since she couldn’t seem to do anything but mumble incoherent nothings, I leaned in and voiced the connection for her:

“She’s the kid of your crush, Philionel.”

Sylphiel clapped her hands over her ears. “NO!” she cried.

“Don’t say it! I don’t want to remember!” She rocked back and forth, clearly still traumatized.

It was hard to blame her. Just putting the words *crush* and *Philionel* in the same sentence had given me goose bumps, and I was more used to him.

Zel didn’t know Phil personally so he just exchanged confused glances with Phil’s surprisingly not-fugly daughter.

After a minute, Sylphiel managed to pull herself together. She sniffed and turned back to me.

“Anyway,” she said shakily. “I don’t see Mister Gourry with you.”

Eep. She’d had a thing for Gourry, hadn’t she? I tried to sink in my chair, hoping it might shield me from the upcoming awkwardness.

Sylphiel’s eyes filled with horror. “Miss Lina,” she gasped. “You didn’t… you didn’t…” She suddenly looked on the border of having another breakdown. “You didn’t sell him, did you?!”

I sighed. I would’ve replied with “Do I look like someone who would cash in a teammate for some quick coin?” but I didn’t want to hear her answer.

“I didn’t *sell* him, Sylphiel,” I assured her.

“Then… you stole his Sword of Light and abandoned him on the highway?!”

“Cut me some slack, Sylphiel!” I let out an irritated breath. “I

wouldn’t do that, contrary to popular belief.” “Then what happened to Mister Gourry?!”

I took a moment to think of what to tell her. The truth? Maybe it wouldn’t look so bad if I cutsied it up a little.

“Gourry’s … uh …” I flashed her an innocent smile. “BeenkidnappedbyHellmasterPhibrizzo. Tee hee!”

The table went silent. I was starting to regret my faux-cute thing when Sylphiel crumpled to the ground.

★★★

We managed to bring Sylphiel back around a few minutes later. She recovered quickly, at least, and took a seat next to me at the table.

“This is no time to be fainting,” she mumbled, mostly to herself. I could see her shaking knees under the table.

"Miss Lina, please." She turned her glassy eyes up at me. "What in the world happened?"

Amelia, Zel, and I all looked at each other. Explaining what had happened would be easy enough, but then Sylphiel would insist on coming with us. *And haven't I involved enough other people as it is?* I thought.

Still, I'd already mentioned Hellmaster. It was probably too late to avoid going into detail.

I sighed. Fine," I said at last. "But I'm warning you— this is big, Sylphiel. And after you hear it, you may wish you never did." I looked at her seriously. "Are you sure you wanna know?"

She nodded without hesitation. "I do," she assured.

Here goes nothing.

I spent the next chunk of time explaining all the insane things that had happened to us lately. Xelloss, Chaos Dragon, the Claire Bible, Hellmaster taking Gourry to Sairaag—I really didn't leave much out (although I may have skimmed over some of the more embarrassing parts). I also mentioned that Chaos Dragon's remaining followers were still trying to kill me, this time under General Rashatt.

When I was finally done, Sylphiel let her gaze fall to her hands which rested in her lap. "Wow," she murmured, and I could tell from her tone that she was trying not to lose it again. "So … Mister Gourry was abducted in order to summon *you* to Sairaag."

I swallowed. "Yeah," I said, sinking back in my chair a little.

Something mildly frightening lurked behind her words.

"Mmm." But instead of reaching over the table and throttling me, Sylphiel just drifted into her own thoughts. Her eyes glazed over as she went silent.

I gave her a minute. "Sylphiel?" I asked at last.

She turned to me at that, her eyes refocusing on my face. "I still haven't told you why I'm here, have I?" she asked quietly.

I blinked. "Uh … no," I said, a little confused at her changing the subject. Didn't she want to talk about Gourry?

Sylphiel looked away. "I was working as an assistant for my uncle," she began. "He's a magic doctor in Saillune City, and he agreed to take care of me. One day, I heard a strange story from a traveling merchant we took on as a patient: that he'd passed by Sairaag, and the tree had disappeared."

"Flagohn's *gone?*" I asked incredulously

The single, giant tree in the center of Sairaag City absorbed miasma around the area for food. It was known as Flagohn, the Holy Tree … and it had been the only thing left after the second destruction of the city.

"You mean … it broke or got chopped down or something?" I asked.

She shook her head. "He was very clear," she answered. "The tree is literally gone."

Gone. I stared at my plate in confusion. I wouldn't call Flagohn

the size of a mountain, but it was at *least* as big as a hill. The trunk alone was the size of a city block. How could something that big just vanish?

Sylphiel let out a breath. “I also found the story strange,” she went on, voicing my thoughts. “So I asked for more details.”

“And?”

“The tale became far stranger,” she said in a demure tone. “The more questions I asked, the less sense everything made, so I rephrased what I was asking—at which point he mentioned that there was a city at Sairaag.”

I stopped my teacup before it reached my lips. “*What?*” I breathed.

Sylphiel closed her eyes. “He said that Sairaag had not been destroyed; that there was definitely a city with people living in it. Just … Flagohn, alone, had vanished without a trace.”

I put down my cup. Sairaag had *definitely* been destroyed. It had been about half a year ago, and Zel, Sylphiel, and I had seen it happen right in front of us. There was no way that a city could’ve been rebuilt from a crater that fast. And that still didn’t explain what had happened to the tree!

Amelia, who’d been silent up until that point, decided to cut in. “They already rebuilt it?” she asked. “I heard about Sairaag City being destroyed by an unknown cause not that long ago. And I definitely remember hearing about the tree.”

Unknown cause?

I slapped a hand to my forehead the same instant Zelgadiss looked over at me. We'd never told Amelia about that little adventure, had we?

"What?" Amelia asked. "Did I say something?"

"We'll discuss that later," Zel interjected, cutting off yet another long story at the pass. "Sylphiel, you're sure that traveler wasn't lying or hallucinating?"

She shook her head. "That occurred to me immediately, or course, so I visited a pub to ask more travelers. But then the story got even stranger: some had seen the tree alone in a wasteland, others had more recently seen an active city but no tree." She swallowed. "In other words, the tree vanished and the city appeared at a sudden recent point in time."

Yikes. I chewed my lower lip, trying to piece together the story in my head. But no matter what direction I looked at it from, the tale was pure crazy

"If it's not a mistake," I said at last, "then I'm stumped." I cringed at my choice of words and continued. "Any idea what it means, Sylphiel?"

"No," she murmured. "I'm traveling to Sairaag myself to confirm the incident with my own eyes."

I stared at her. "After the stuff I just told you about *Hellmaster* being in Sairaag?!"

Sylphiel pursed her lips. "Upon hearing about Mister Gourry's abduction, my resolve has only been strengthened. However …" She

trailed off for a minute, clearly thinking something through. “I’ll be able to travel faster if I go alone,” she said at last. “I’ll rescue Mister Gourry myself, if it’s possible to do so.”

Dishware clattered as Amelia hit the table with her traditionally clenched fists. “You can’t do that!” she cried in unison with Zel and me.

“We-we’re talking about Hellmaster Phibrizzo!” Amelia exclaimed. “Evil Incarnate! Lord of Destruction! There’s no way you can take him on by yourself!”

“I know,” Sylphiel answered, strangely calm. She glanced over at me. “But if Miss Lina goes to Hellmaster, no good will come of it. Phibrizzo’s scheme is likely some worldwide plot.”

I didn’t reply. From the look in her eyes, Sylphiel had guessed most of Phibrizzo’s intentions.

“However.” Sylphiel brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. “I’m not saying you should abandon Mister Gourry—I just think that someone should go ahead of you and try to free him first. I’ll do it… if I’m able.”

I sat up. “I know what you’re saying, Sylphiel. But—” “Going ahead on my own may *seem* hopeless, but you can’t afford to have your hands tied with Chaos Dragon’s survivors still after you, Miss Lina. This is the best decision.”

“Stop being so objective for a second.” I furrowed my eyebrows. “You’re talking about a ridiculously huge risk.”

She paused. “Then do you have a plan with minimal risk?” she

asked coolly.

That one shut me up. I stared at her, a myriad of excuses dying before they hit my lips. Finally I dropped back in my chair in silence.

What other plan *did* I have? Amelia, Zel, and I had decided to go after Gourry regardless of the danger—we hadn't considered better methods to save him because there hadn't been any. If we couldn't defeat Hellmaster, for example, we'd have to wiggle out of his plan … but I didn't have a good track record of escaping his manipulation.

I sighed and rubbed my temples. Shortly before leaving Dragon's Peak, Milgazia had offered to kill me. He knew that Gaav was right—my death would put an end to whatever Hellmaster was planning. But Milgazia wasn't a Mazoku, so he left it up to me. I politely declined the dying option, Milgazia let me go on my way, and he himself opted to stay on Dragon's Peak as an observer.

I didn't want to die. And even if I did, I knew it might just prompt Hellmaster to kill Gourry and forget his whole plan; he'd already killed Gaav, so it wasn't like the entire thing could be a bust. It wasn't just *my* life on the line anymore.

Which brought me back to Sylphiel's plan. Yes, it was better than me marching into Hellmaster's trap—but it was putting yet another life in unbelievable danger.

"Don't worry about me," Sylphiel said quietly, once again speaking my mind for me. "I value my life, so I won't do anything rash when my enemy is as strong as Phibrizzo. I know what this may

entail." She looked away. "But that said, I'm not asking for your approval. I'm going to Sairaag alone, regardless of what you say."

Zel crossed his arms. "So what you're saying," he said, "is that we shouldn't bother trying to stop you?"

Sylphiel nodded firmly

Great, I thought. *Just what we need: more complications*.

★★★

That night, we split to our respective rooms to get some sleep. I wasn't counting on getting a lot, but I had to try; traveling day after day toward certain death got really exhausting. I'd just taken off my mantle and shoulder guards when someone knocked on the door. I frowned and looked over my shoulder.

Now what?

"Miss Lina?" Sylphiel asked through the wood. "Are you asleep yet?"

I undid the lock for her. "Not yet," I said, pulling the door open.

She stood out in the hallway with a very serious look on her face. That wasn't much of a surprise—our conversation earlier had sucked.

"I have something I wanted to discuss with you," she said. "Do you mind?"

"No. What's the matter?"

She walked into my room without answering. She closed and

locked the door behind her, sat in one of the cheap chairs in my room, and folded her hands in her lap. I sat on the bed opposite her.

"Miss Lina," she began, "I'll get right to the point." Her eyes bore into me. "What do you think of Mister Gourry?"

"He's good with sharp things, but his brain is soup."

Sylphiel's mouth hung open. I furrowed my eyebrows.

What? I wondered defensively. *That's the first thing I think of when I think of him, okay?*

She swallowed. "Th-that's not what I mean," she stuttered. "I wanted to know if you … like him or not."

"Not like him? If I didn't like him, I would've knocked him to the dirt and stolen his stuff ages ago."

Sylphiel sighed. I wasn't giving her the answers she was waiting for, apparently, but it didn't help that I had no idea what she was getting at.

"Let me rephrase this," she murmured. "Not long ago, when we traveled from Sairaag to Saillune City together, I asked you why you two were traveling together. You said you were after the Sword of Light, remember?" She clasped her hands together. "Yet now, from what you've told me, the Sword of Light is a demon. You won't be able to retrieve it from Phibrizzo's grasp, right? And without the Sword of Light, even if you do rescue Gourry, you'll have lost your reason for traveling with him."

That struck me for a second. "Oh," I said at last, working through what she'd said. Hellmaster probably hadn't thought that far

yet, but there was no way he'd give back the sword. So Gourry couldn't, say … give me the Sword of Light as a thank-you for saving him.

Dammit.

"Yeah," I said slowly, crossing my arms. "I guess we won't have any reason to travel together after that." As my mind started going through other possibilities, Sylphiel suddenly gave me a pained smile.

"Miss Lina,"she said gently. "Are you trying to think of another reason for you two to stay together?"

I gave a start. I… I had been doing that, hadn't I? Sylphiel had been reading my mind all day, which was a little disturbing.

"If I'm right, Miss Lina, then why do you think you're doing that?"

I opened my mouth to answer, then suddenly realized I didn't know what to say. I stared at her, mouth agape, feeling (and probably looking) like a dumbstruck idiot.

Sylphiel looked to the floor, that weak smile still on her face. "I understand," she murmured as she got to her feet. "I'll be departing from the inn early tomorrow morning. I'll rescue Mister Gourry on my own somehow."

You understand? I thought, confused. *You understand what?*

"Goodnight, Miss Lina." With that, Sylphiel left the room and closed the door behind her. For a long minute,

I simply stared after her. I swallowed hard. For a reason I myself didn't understand, I just sat there, alone, my chest feeling unbearably tight.

★★★

"Sylphiel really left," Amelia muttered the next morning, her eyes traveling from the road to the grassy plain that surrounded us on all sides.

I shrugged. True to what she'd said, Sylphiel had left before we'd woken up that morning. It was a warm, sunny day; we had a long way to go, and everyone was preoccupied by everything that was going on. I could feel another long conversation coming on.

"She'd better be careful," Zel said.

"She already said she would be. At least she won't get caught up in Rashatt chasing after me—so that's something, right?" I rolled my shoulders and flashed a smile.

Amelia tapped her chin. "Based on the way she was talking yesterday," she commented worriedly, "I wonder if she has feelings for Mister Gourry."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "You figured that out from your one conversation?" I asked. "You're pretty good, Amelia."

"Well, anyone would—she was being pretty obvious. But if she really does like him, I'm worried that she'll act without thinking, no matter how careful she says she'll be."

I thought about that one… Amelia was probably right; Sylphiel tended to get worked up, after all. But what else could we do? She'd

already left for Sairaag, so we just had to follow as fast as we could.

More crap to the pile! Didn't see that *coming*.

My thoughts were sarcastic, but they were truer than I realized. I suddenly noticed something and stopped; Amelia and Zel halted at the same moment.

Rustle, rustle.

The sounds of grass and wind rose up around us. The only shadows against the ground were ours, and the road itself continued straight ahead into the pure, blue sky. It would've been pretty, except for one important thing.

I'd seen mountains in the distance earlier.

Dammit! I thought. *When the hell did we fall into a spell?!*

Amelia stiffened as she looked around. "It must be Rashatt's ward," she said quickly.

There was no sign of anyone nearby; knee-high grass grew as far as the eye could see. And then we heard it again.

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

The grass to our right heaved, like some kind of beast was creeping around inside it. The grass waved erratically, but whatever was hiding in it was definitely headed our way.

"It's coming," Zelgadiss hissed.

The moment he spoke, the swell suddenly stopped.

And a sense of bloodlust raged *behind* us.

The grass was a feint!

I continued to chant the spell I'd already started as the three of us leapt in different directions. A flash of light tore through the air from behind us. Once my feet hit the ground again, I whipped to where the light had come from … and saw nothing but grass waving slightly in the wind.

I blinked. Had something just jumped across space?

The bloodlust hit from behind again, now from where we'd seen the grass move. Sensing the danger, I jumped away while twisting around in midair.

SHOOM! A streak of light sliced through the grass, straight for Amelia!

Amelia jerked away in the nick of time. The light singed a few strands of her hair before vanishing again in the perfect blue sky.

I gritted my teeth. *That* light had come from the grass, but the bloodlust from a second before had disappeared. If whoever was after us was jumping across space, I couldn't see where he was—and there was nothing to indicate that he was hiding in the grass somewhere.

Unless ... Realizing something, I continued chanting my spell.

The light wouldn't quit. Cutting back and forth across the grass and air, Amelia and Zel had to hold their spells and pull back They were obviously thrown off by our invisible enemy

That meant it was up to me. "Zelas Brid!" I shouted.

A sash of light extended from my fingertip, its arc changing in midair according to my will. I sent it to impale a section of the green, earthy plain.

RGOOOOOO! The scream seemed to cut right into my head. The landscape around us shook for a second, then returned to its natural state. The range of mountains once again appeared in the distance.

I let out a breath. *Looks like I broke the ward.*

"General Rashatt!" I called, sure he was somewhere he could hear me. "That ward we were in—the whole place was your demonic body, wasn't it?!"

There was a pause. "That is … correct," he answered at last, space warping as soon as he said the words. When he finally showed himself, I could see he was in his blood-red dragon scale armor.

Rashatt breathed heavily while he glared. "I'm impressed you noticed," he said darkly. "I had certainly thought… that the forcefield would … impede you a bit longer."

Maybe it was wishful thinking, but his voice sounded pretty strained. I was hoping that meant my shot had taken a lot out of him.

A thought struck me, and I grimaced. *We were just inside Rashatt*, I realized. *Ew.*

"Very well," Rashatt called as he slowly drew his sword. "That being the case, I will fight you head on!"

"Ra Tilt!"

Amelia had taken his declaration of a direct fight as a sign to

shoot him from the side. Rashatt swung his sword.

"That won't work!" he roared as he literally sliced the blue light in half.

Zel took that as a sign. "Ra Tilt!" he shouted, and his spell completely engulfed the Mazoku.

"GAAAAAAH!" Rashatt screamed.

I knew one blow wouldn't take him out.

So did Amelia. She immediately started chanting her second Ra Tilt. Bloodlust surged from behind us.

I knew it was Moldirag—but I also wasn't surprised. Without missing a beat, I turned and released the spell I'd intended for Rashatt.

"Gaav Flare!" I cried.

A belt of magic fire emerged from my right palm, shooting through the air and totally nailing Moldirag!

At least, it was supposed to. Instead, I just stood there, my Power Words trailing into the wind ineffectually as I thrust out my empty palm. I probably looked like a complete moron.

Why didn't the spell work?!

I was shocked stupid. My incantation, motions, and mental control should've been perfect. So why was I just standing there?

Moldirag took advantage of my spell's failure to launch multiple spears of light at Amelia. Amelia dodged easily.

Needless to say, I was a combination of confused and pissed. Had Rashatt put a seal on my magic when I'd been inside his ward? Mazenda had done that a while ago, and it had sucked royally

When in doubt, experiment. I began the incantation for the Dragon Slave.

Amelia had already finished chanting a new Ra Tilt, so she launched it at Moldirag. But with a single, loud roar, it shattered like a glass hitting a stone floor.

Zelgadiss turned to Moldirag and chanted his own Ra Tilt. Rashatt laughed at him, a twisted sneer on his face.

"It is futile!" Rashatt cried. "No matter how often you try!"

Zel ignored him and released. "Ra Tilt!" he shouted.

Rashatt raised another roar to protect his precious tree-demon. But this time, the joke was on him—Zel wasn't aiming for Moldirag.

FOOM!

Rashatt screamed in pain and surprise as the blue flames swallowed him. I had to admit, it was a great fake-out on Zel's part.

I was convinced the second Ra Tilt still wasn't enough. Finishing my own chant, I released my spell and hoped for the best.

"Dragon Slave!"

Crimson light appeared out of thin air and zoomed toward Rashatt. I blinked in surprise.

It worked!

Probably expecting another attack, Rashatt sliced the approaching light in two. It was annoying, admittedly, but at least it proved that my magic wasn't sealed.

So what had happened earlier? Why hadn't my Gaav Flare—?

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. *No way*.

I suddenly had a hypothesis. If what I was thinking was true, then it sure explained a few things … but I wasn't yet sure and that meant more experimentation. I quickly began chanting my next Dragon Slave.

"Your weak methods will fail!" Rashatt declared. He sliced his sword to shoot a shockwave at me, but I easily sidestepped it and released my spell.

"Dragon Slave!" I shouted.

"Ra Tilt!" Amelia echoed as she released at Moldirag.

I was impressed to see that she'd delayed the activation of her spell on purpose. Now we had simultaneous attacks on separate opponents, which meant Rashatt had to abandon Moldirag or eat my Dragon Slave.

Unfortunately, Rashatt refused to play along. "Fools!" he boomed as the blue fire and crimson light were shattered simultaneously.

Crap.

I hadn't expected him to be able to do that to different spells going in different directions. He wasn't a general for nothing; he was

proving to be a crafty bastard.

Call me stubborn, but I wanted to try again. "Dragon Slave!" I shouted as I released another spell at Rashatt. When he easily batted it away, I just started chanting another one.

While I kept trying for Rashatt, Amelia and Zel kept casting at Rashatt and Moldirag. But they didn't make any headway, and *I* didn't make any headway, so the whole thing just got stupid after a while.

I decided to end it.

"Dragon Slave!" I cried, going for Rashatt again. When he blocked that too, I started to breathe raggedly.

"Ugh!" I gasped. "My magic power's finally … !"

Rashatt scoffed. "What's wrong, Lina Inverse?" he taunted. "You exhausted your magic energy on a string of insignificant spells? You really are a fool!" He raised his sword high.

Amelia chanted Ra Tilt to cover me. Just before she completed her spell, I jerked my thumb at the white demon behind us.

"Over there!" I shouted.

She instantly did as she was told and switched her target from Rashatt to Moldirag. It was time to see if my hypothesis was right.

"Ra Tilt!" Amelia cried.

In one of the more refreshing sights of the day, Moldirag's body was instantly engulfed in blue flame.

“OOOoooOOOooo … !”

The white Mazoku was annihilated, roaring like a beast as she went.

Rashatt’s face fell. “Moldirag!” he cried. He glared daggers at Amelia.

“Grr!” Rashatt clenched a fist. “You’ll pay for this, mark my words!” And with that empty threat, Rashatt vanished into space.

Perfect, I thought. Everything had happened exactly as I’d expected it to. As I stood there, smiling, Amelia and Zel stared at me like I’d stolen their wallets.

“What the hell?” Zel finally asked with a very suspicious look.

I took in a deep, victorious breath. Of course Amelia and Zel were curious—who wouldn’t be?

I’d spent half of the fight flinging useless Dragon Slaves at Rashatt, and he hadn’t defended Moldirag when she’d really needed it at the end. The whole thing probably seemed completely bizarre. “No worries, guys,” I said with a laugh. “I just figured out how to beat Rashatt.”

★★★

The rock-strewn highway extended up a small, high hill. Other than a small grove on my right side and the mountains in the distance, there was nothing but wheat fields as far as the eye could see. I expected the next town to be visible beyond the hill.

I stretched out my arms, enjoying the morning sun on my back as

I walked in my silent solitude.

Yup. Solitude. I was alone, and it wasn't half bad.

Amelia and Zel had gone ahead to Sairaag in pursuit of Sylphiel. We'd decided it would be easier that way. Our last fight with Rashatt had been four days earlier, and Amelia and Zel had continued the next morning.

As I walked the abandoned highway, I suddenly realized something. I stopped and looked around.

I've been by here before. With Gourry, during our trip to Sairaag together. Since I was about to be attacked by an enemy there *again*, maybe the place was cursed.

"You're leaking bloodlust, General," I said into the wind. "If you're trying to ambush me, you just earned a big fat F." His voice came from behind me. "I don't see your entourage," he commented.

I slowly turned to him, my mantle flapping in the wind. He stood there, in his dragon scale armor, the lush landscape behind him making him seem extra impressive.

I shrugged dismissively. "I had them go ahead to Sairaag. I knew they wouldn't get very far if they stayed with me." Rashatt's lips curled up in a smile. "Oh," he said. "Then you've finally resigned to your death."

"What? Get real. It means I'm ready to get serious and take you out alone—I'm more than enough for the likes of you, thanks."

Rashatt snorted. "You have quite the mouth on you, hm? But regardless …"

"We're ending this here!" I finished for him, leaping back as I chanted a spell.

"And I prefer it that way!"

Rashatt opened his left palm and shot a number of balls of light at me.

I jumped to the side.

A moment later, Rashatt's balls of light slammed into the stone highway and gouged multiple holes into the earth.

I can do this in one shot, I thought. *One shot, Lina!* I sucked in a breath and released my spell.

"Dragon Slave!" I cried.

Rashatt immediately got a dig in. "I told you it's futile, Lina Inverse!"

I knew hitting him was a waste of time, so I wasn't *aiming* for him. My crimson light exploded into the ground by his feet.

BOOOM!

The wind shuddered as the grass bent backwards in the explosion. I also knew *that* wouldn't inflict damage on the demonic Rashatt; before the reverberation of the explosion had time to die out, I chanted my next spell and ran through the cloud of dust straight for him.

As I flew out, breaking through the wall of dust, I saw Rashatt glaring at me from a distance away.

“Did you just mean to blind me?!” he howled, readying his sword to send a shockwave.

He wanted to force me to evade so he could regain a good position.

Like I was gonna let him! I ran at him again, picking up speed … And closed my eyes.

I heard his cry of shock. “What?!” he blurted. If he still sent that shockwave at me, I knew I’d be dead in a second.

SHOOM! The shockwave came after a second of hesitation harmlessly passing by my right ear.

I knew it. My unexpected action hadn’t thrown of his aim—he’d *meant* to miss me. I opened my eyes again to see him standing right in front of me, his face torn between expressions of hesitation and shock.

I activated my spell. “Ragna Blade!” I shouted.

SLICE!

The blade of darkness impaled Rashatt right in the chest.

Rashatt choked. “Wh-why you … !”

I smiled triumphantly at him, unbothered by his anguished expression. “Too bad, Rashatt,” I mocked. “It looks like you just couldn’t cut it as an actor.”

His gaze darkened.

“But maybe it’s not fair to compare you to Xelloss and

Phibrizzo, General. Or should I even be calling you that?" I raised ar eyebrow. "After all, you're *Hellmaster Phibrizzo's lieutenant now, aren't you?*"

"What?!" Rashatt gurgled.

So I'd been right. There was no way he was working to avenge Chaos Dragon; he was after me because Phibrizzo had ordered him.

There'd been too many inconsistencies. If he'd wanted to kill me just to spite Phibrizzo, why the ward inside the city and the retreat once it was broken? With Chaos Dragon's plans completely trashed, it was easier (albeit a bit violent) to blow away an entire city in order to take me out. But he'd consistently retreated, and always when my magic energy was low—like the last time, when he'd deliberately stopped guarding Moldirag and chosen to retreat.

Not only that, but he'd always waited a few days before attacking again, which meant that I was always replenished when he came for another fight. And his "I'm gonna kill you" garbage. He'd always gone after Amelia and Zel in battle, sending nothing more than token attacks my way.

Only one thing made sense: he was putting on a crappy act.

My first tangible piece of evidence that he was working for Hellmaster was when my Gaav Flare hadn't Worked. If a spell that draws on the power of Chaos

Dragon Gaav doesn't work anymore, that means Gaav is *entirely* gone. Hellmaster had destroyed that guy beyond a trace, apparently. And although I didn't know much about which demons obeyed

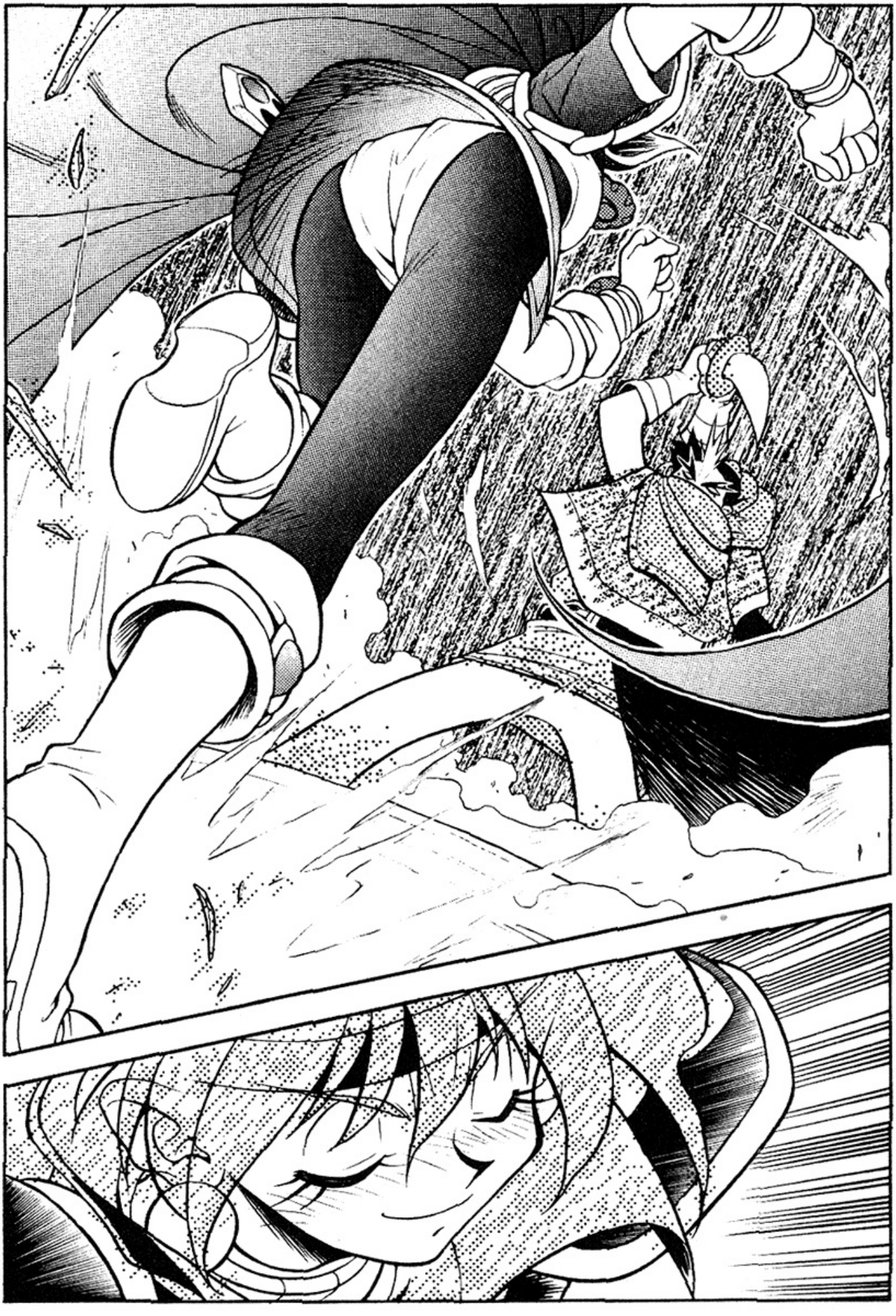
which other demons, for pure demons like Rashatt and Raltaak to obey Gaav to the point of *betraying* Ruby Eye Shabranigdu probably meant that they bore absolute obedience to their creator. Just because Chaos Dragon had human will mixed in with him didn't mean they were off the hook.

So with Gaav completely gone, who would Rashatt obey? The default, I assumed, was the lord of Mazoku in the world: the Demon King of the North, Ruby Eye Shabranigdu. And who was under his authority? The mastermind of a particular project: Hellmaster Phibrizzo.

"Looks like I hit the mark," | said through my teeth before slicing sideways with the blade of darkness.

"RAAAAAAAAAA!"

The wind trembled from the scream. Rashatt's body turned into a burst of red flakes, scattering themselves across the green field around me.



I sighed. First for Gaav, then for Phibrizzo … General Rashatt had been nothing but a patsy until the end. It was sad, really. Even before working for Phibrizzo, he hadn't been able to kill me. It was exactly why I didn't mind sending Amelia and Zel ahead without me. And although Rashatt probably could've avoided the Ragna Blade alone, my Dragon Slave had masked my closing the distance and chanting the Ragna Blade spell. Closing my eyes made him hesitate, he missed with his shockwave on purpose as a warning shot… but I'd just blown through his hesitation and cut him down with the Blade. Almost had to feel bad for the guy.

At least Hellmaster's objective had become a lot clearer. He'd sent Rashatt to try and back me into a corner; Rashatt just hadn't been a good enough actor to get the job done.

I turned my eyes back to the highway that stretched in front of me. That way, in the distance, Sairaag City waited for me. The City of Ghosts waited for me.

And, unfortunately, so did Hellmaster Phibrizzo.

Sairaag, the Place Where Illusions Dwell

"Huh?"

I immediately halted. Confused, I looked at the forest that loomed ahead of me.

The air was cool and smelled of plants and earth. I couldn't hear the call of a single bird or insect; only the sound of rustling leaves hung on the wind. That definitely hadn't changed since the last time I'd visited.

It was the Miasma Forest beside Sairaag City. According to legend, a forest filled with miasma grew from where the Sword of Light dripped blood after destroying Demon Beast Zanaffar. Fancy, right? But although the sights and sounds were the same as they'd ever been, the miasma itself had vanished from the trees.

I know. Weird.

Although I remembered the Miasma Forest's miasma being pretty light, being light and being gone are two very different things. Did it have something to do with Phibrizzo? Maybe, but you'd think that would result in *thicker* miasma, not a neat miasma vanishing act.

I shrugged it off. Either way, I didn't have time to stand around and wonder; the miasma issue, along with all the other mysteries that had been piling up, would probably get cleared up once I reached Sairaag.

Since I'd taken down Rashatt, my travels had gone by without incident. Amelia and Zel had unfortunately left me in such a hurry

that I couldn't catch up, so I'd just followed in their footsteps. Rumors in the villages and towns I stopped in implied that they were about two days ahead of me.

And speaking of rumors—the villagers at those stops told me more about Sairaag. They confirmed that there *was* a city again, and one person from a village I'd passed through that morning said that the city rebuilt itself all in one day, totally out of the blue. Even weirder than that, the new inhabitants of Sairaag were apparently the *old* inhabitants of Sairaag. As in the inhabitants who had been there before the destruction of the city. Nobody could say what happened.

What the hell had Hellmaster done?

Considering the mountain of questions I had, I knew ruminating would only make things worse. But I'm a thinker *and* a doer, y'see—I can't turn off my brain that easily. So I trudged forward with my thoughts, so completely buried in them that I was surprised to see my field of vision suddenly expand.

I'd passed through the forest. And there, spread in front of me, was the skyline of Sairaag City.

Whoa.

Other than the huge Holy Tree noticeably absent from its center, the skyline looked exactly as I'd remembered it. I could even see human figures milling through the streets.

The story *was* true. Or some of it, at least—the inhabitants couldn't be real people, so they were probably illusions constructed by Phibrizzo. Or, if I was unlucky, every one of them was a Mazoku.

I shuddered. At least that second option was less likely; if there were that many demons, he'd be picking a fight with the entire world before ever getting to use me for his twisted little plan. But whatever the case, I had to consider every inhabitant Hellmaster revived as my potential enemy.

As I stared at the city, I realized just how much I didn't want to go there. Seriously, can you blame me? But I'd come all that way, and everyone I knew was already there … it wasn't like I could just leave.

"Like I have a choice," I muttered. After taking a deep breath, I started on the final leg of my journey to Sairaag City ★★★

Sairaag was surprisingly peaceful. Pedestrians traveled along streets that were lined with houses and shops. People bustled, kids ran underfoot, and not a single thing looked out of place in the slightest.

That was exactly why it was so damn *creepy*.

I'd half expected Hellmaster to meet me at the entrance to the city, spouting "So good of you to come, Lina Inverse!" or some other cliche villain speech. But the place seemed normal, Hellmaster was nowhere to be found, and I felt so uncomfortable that I wanted to make a break for it.

But I didn't, obviously.

I knew the first thing I had to do was find everyone

else.

Talking to townspeople is usually the fastest way to find

someone, but I wasn't sure I wanted to try. But despite all the … *reservations* I had about the people milling around me, Sairaag was a huge place; I couldn't go into a search blind.

I sighed angrily. *Desperate times*, I reminded myself, and headed for the nearest restaurant.

I bought some juice from the lady who worked there and gave her Zelgadiss' description. He stands out a lot more than Amelia and Sylphiel, after all; I figured I could get immediate answers if I asked about a brooding guy hiding his face under a white shroud.

"A man in white?" the old woman repeated. She pursed her lips for a second—like any normal, non-magical, non-demon old woman—before finally shaking her head.

"I don't recall," she replied. "And I've been doing business here for some time."

I tried harder. "He was probably with a girl," I added while I sipped my juice. "Black hair, about my age?"

She thought longer, but still no dice. "I'm really sorry," she said. "Maybe you should go check the inns?"

"I'll do that." I thanked her, finished my juice, and walked out of the place.

All in all, the experience was … surprisingly normal. I still gripped my arms and shuddered.

These people could all be Hellmaster's minions, I reminded myself. And I didn't want to wander around a place filled with those, obviously. But it was either talk to the weirdly normal townspeople

or walk around aimlessly, and neither plan sounded like a great idea.

I was trudging along, wondering what undesirable option I'd have to try next, when a familiar voice suddenly called out over the city noise.

"Miss Lina!"

I blinked and turned. There, by the nearby street in white-accented priestess robes, stood a dark-haired vision of loveliness I never thought I'd be so happy to see.

"Sylphiel?!" I shouted. I pushed my way through the crowd to get to her faster.

"So you're safe," she said. "That would mean the Chaos Dragon minion who was after you is … ?"

"Taken care of," I confirmed. "Have you seen Amelia and Zelgadiss? They should've gotten here three days ago."

Sylphiel's face fell. "About that," she said quietly.

Oh, crap.

"What?!" I demanded. "Did something happen?!"

She swallowed. "Actually … they've been missing since yesterday."

"Missing?!"

She gestured to the road. "Let's walk while we talk," she suggested grimly, setting off down the city street. I swallowed and let her lead the way.

Sylphiel simply frowned for a second. “I arrived here about five days ago,” she said at last, her voice quivering a little. “Not a single thing has changed since before the city was laid to waste. I went to the temple, as if someone were calling me, and there … there…” She covered her mouth. “There was Father, coming to welcome me home, his smile as kind as it was the day he died.”

Ouch. I wanted to console her, but I wasn’t sure what to say. “Sylphiel,” I mumbled sympathetically

Sylphiel’s shoulders shuddered a little as she walked a few steps in front of me. “That isn’t … very fair, is it? Everyone here can’t be alive, but it still feels like the city’s destruction was nothing but a bad dream.”

She fell into silence for a second, then sighed. When she started talking again, her voice was firmer.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I’ll return to the matter at hand. Since I truly did wonder if this Sairaag was an illusion or reality, I briefly investigated it. I found that the most suspicious place is in the center of the city. Here,” she added as she suddenly stopped.

I looked around. At some point, we’d traveled past the road and come to the city’s center. Flagohn had originally been rooted there, but now …

“Huh,” I muttered thinly, letting my gaze trail up the giant building in front of us.

Despite being massive, the building wasn’t tall—it was only about a story high. What was unusual was its girth. The place was

about as big as a city block, built of gray-colored stones and almost resembling a kind of temple. It was like it had been put there to replace the vanished Flagohn.

Weirder still was the lack of windows and doors. The round building didn't have a single one—and that meant no entrance, either.

"I'd heard from a nearby village that this appeared suddenly," Sylphiel explained. "It's extremely suspicious, and, if I'm guessing right, where Hellmaster is lurking with Mister Gourry.

"But you can see that there's no entrance, right? I even used a Levitation spell to look at it from above. I asked Fa— the people in the city, but all I got was 'I cannot answer. For those who can guess, no explanation is needed; for those who cannot, no explanation will suffice.' "

Woooow. Do they speak in verse, too? My day just kept getting better and better.

I set my jaw. "That sounds like Hellmaster, all right," I muttered.

"Yes. Then, two days ago, Miss Amelia and Mister Zelgadiss arrived at the city. On the first day, they investigated this building and lodged at the temple with me." Her voice lowered. "They left to investigate further yesterday morning. They haven't returned since."

I took another long, hard look at the building. "Investigate," I repeated. "Hn … that might mean they found a way in and decided to try it out."

"Like a hidden door?" Sylphiel offered.

Hidden doors are pretty common on mysterious stone buildings. It was easy to imagine Amelia and Zel finding one.

Sylphiel frowned. “But if that had happened, I think they would have returned immediately to tell me.”

I gave her a thin smile. “You can be pretty naïve, Sylphiel. Amelia only needed one guess to figure out how you feel about Gourry; she was worried that you’d let your feelings go to your head. I wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t tell you to keep you from running in alone.”

Sylphiel opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She looked away.

Looks like I hit her where it hurts.

“Anyway,” I went on. “Let’s just find the entrance. That’s what’s important now, right?”

I drew in closer to the building and started to inspect it. The place definitely looked all stone, but I had no idea what kind; it didn’t look like anything I’d ever seen before. I couldn’t find any seams in the outer wall. There were pillars here and there to support the stonework, but a quick check showed that there probably wasn’t anything inside them.

I was getting more baffled by the second. As I mentioned, I’d expected Hellmaster to find me in Sairaag— not something I really wanted, but that still would’ve been something. I’d come all this way, through all the crap the demons could throw at me, and the only thing that greeted me was a fat, ugly hideout that was too good

for a door.

Well, you know what they say: if you don't see a door, make one. (That's what I say, anyway.)

I began chanting a spell. I borrowed power from my talismans, augmenting my attack power.

"Dam Brass!" I called.

Dam Brass is usually used to pulverize an enemy into dust. With an augmentation on it, it was sure to do a number on a stone wall.

BWING!

I gaped. My Dam Brass hit the wall and *bounced right off*. The stone wasn't even scratched.

Seriously, what else?!

That meant it had a ward, just like Rashatt's in Lualdo City. At least I knew how to break that. I chanted the Amplification spell, then started reciting words for the Ragna Blade.

The Ragna Blade had sliced up Rashatt's field like my knife on a holiday ham. I was sure it would work now. Well … mostly sure. But it was worth a try, right?

At almost the exact moment I began chanting the spell, a low sound cut me off.

KOOOOO.

With a dull, heavy scrape, part of the wall opened into the building.

The surprise door actually pissed me off a little. *Stupid Hellmaster* I thought bitterly. *He just wanted to save his precious Evil Hideout*.

At least I didn't have to waste my magic energy. I stopped chanting and took a closer look at the door. A thick darkness stood right beyond it, like a black curtain had been pulled across. Ignoring the shocked look on Sylphiel's face, I took a step inside.

The instant I broke past the dark boundary, my field of vision opened. I stopped, dumbfounded.

"H-huh?" I mumbled.

I was staring out at Sairaag again. Sylphiel was staring back at me, equally confused.

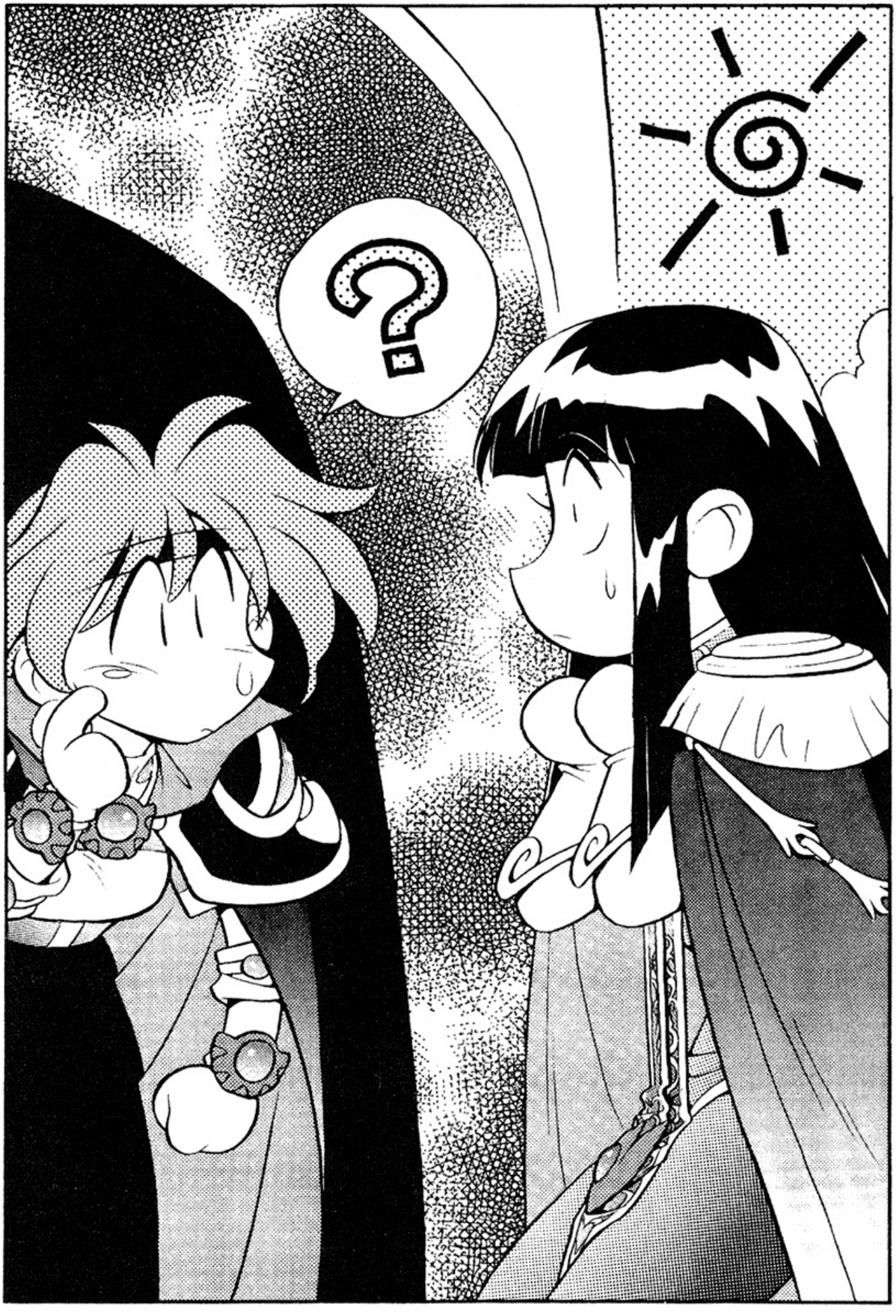
"What the … ?" I turned my head back to see the dark doorway behind me.

Sylphiel cleared her throat. "Um," she began. "What just… happened?"

I didn't have a clue. I'd definitely walked through the doorway, but it looked like it had popped me back out.

Can doors do that? I wondered stupidly.

I decided to do a test.



“Hang on,”I told Sylphiel, then walked through the door again.

And came back out, facing her once more.

“Um…” Sylphiel frowned. “What are you doing, exactly?”

I grumbled and scratched my face, turning back to the wide building. “I guess Hellmaster doesn’t *want* me in. I wish that ass would make up his mind.

“And it’s not like I was circling around in there,”

I clarified. “I just walked straight in, then ended up back out. I guess space is twisted inside it or something.”

“Twisted space?” Sylphiel repeated. “Can he do such a thing?”

“It’s all the rage with high-rank demons.”

I thought back for a second. A nasty demon had shut me in an infinite warped space in Saillune City once upon a time, and I’d escaped easily enough. But getting out from the inside and getting in from the

outside were two very different things. I couldn’t use the same trick.

“But why’s he shutting me out?” I brought up again.

“Hellmaster’s the one who called me here.”

“Maybe he’s not actually inside.”

Oh, no. I needed a lead—she wasn’t taking my lead away from me!

“I’m sure he’s inside,” I said quickly “Mostly sure. Anyway, he

said he'd be waiting in Sairaag, and what else could he be waiting for?"

Sylphiel let out a breath. "I suppose," she said quietly. "And Hellmaster Phibrizzo's aim is to use Mister Gourry so you'll use *that spell*, right? And then he'll make it run amok so it can consume the world in darkness."

"Um … yeah," I mumbled back. I looked away and furrowed my eyebrows.

Everything pointed to the Giga Slave. It was the spell I'd used to destroy one of the seven pieces of Ruby Eye Shabranigdu. Another piece of Ruby Eye, said to be sealed in the Kataart Mountains, known as the Demon King of the North … he knew, didn't he? That I, a human girl, could control the spell that drew power from the Lord of Nightmares.

According to legend, Ruby Eye's body was split into seven pieces and sealed in the fight with Ceipheed the Red Dragon God. If that was true, since they were from a single existence, it made sense for them to share memories and a consciousness. The Demon King of the North had probably figured out that my Giga Slave could run wild and return the world to nothingness— and then had set up the whole plot that I'd been dragged through for so long.

Still, there were a few snags in it for him. One was Chaos Dragon's estrangement. Another was my not possessing exact knowledge of the Lord of Nightmares. Let me make an analogy: a while back, a particular foe miscast a spell and made a Flare Arrow that looked like a really thin carrot. The Giga Slave I'd used earlier

had apparently been as close to the completed version as the Carrot Flare Arrow.

So Phibrizzo had taken control of the project, used me as bait to draw out Gaav, and had Xelloss lead me as far as the Claire Bible. He'd known I would go after information on the Lord of Nightmares in an effort to break free of all the Mazoku manipulation. And then he'd taken Gourry and forced me to come meet him in Sairaag.

And then there was the whole thing with Rashatt. Phibrizzo had sent him (under the guise of still being Phibrizzo's enemy) to push me into using the complete version of the Giga Slave and lose control. But I'd seen through Rashatt's act, so that only left Phibrizzo with one last card to play.

Gourry, If I didn't cast the spell, he could always threaten to kill Gourry.

I swallowed. If that was Phibrizzo's master plan, why couldn't I get into his damn house? Rashatt was gone, but I doubted he'd sent another assassin after me. Actually, he didn't have a reason to send *any* kind of assassin after me.

"Whatever," I blurted angrily. "We're not getting anything done here today; more holes are just gonna let us in and spit us out."

"I suppose," Sylphiel replied. "Then… will you come with me to the temple?"

I hesitated for a second at that. But what did it matter, really? As long as I stayed in the city, Phibrizzo could find me anywhere.

"Please," I said at last. "And, uh, thank you."

I heard a faint, heavy sound behind me. When I turned back to the building, the entrance had vanished back into the stone wall.

★★★

"So you're a friend of Sylphiel's?" Sylphiel's father asked. He smiled kindly at me over the dinner table. "Welcome."

I nodded at him, still unsettled by the whole experience. Sylphiel was staying at a temple of Ceipheed in a corner of Sairaag, one where her father was high priest. We ate dinner with him, he and Sylphiel made conversation … I could see what she meant when she'd said the destruction of Sairaag seemed like nothing but a dream.

Her father was a gentle guy, from what I could tell. He was over forty and had a thick, black moustache. No matter which way you looked at him, he seemed like a perfectly normal man.

And it wasn't just him—the priests and priestesses attending the temple, the worship services, and the statue to Ceipheed were all as they should be. Not a single thing looked strange or out of place, which was weird considering they weren't supposed to exist.

The rules of etiquette were pretty vague when it came to staying in a non-existent house. I decided to play it simple and pretended everything was normal.

Besides, I thought. *What's being suspicious gonna get you?* I needed information, and getting hostile would only make things harder and more exhausting.

I wasn't sure how much Sylphiel's father could tell me, anyway.

First order of business: I had to figure out how much he knew. As the high priest made light conversation with me, I nodded at the appropriate times and waited for the right moment to start digging.

"Mister High Priest," I squeezed in at last. "Do you know what the building in the center of Sairaag's for?"

Sylphiel threw me a sharp look. I knew she didn't like me asking, but I had to try—even if it meant getting her father to admit their city held Phibrizzo's stronghold. She probably couldn't stand that a guy who looked like her father was being treated like he was, but what was she gonna say? She knew that her father was really dead.

I expected a bunch of reactions from the guy, but the only one I got was one of distaste. His face looked constrained.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "But I… cannot say."

"And why not?" I asked rudely, bringing some asparagus wrapped in smoked salmon to my lips.

He looked to the table. "Because I cannot answer, no matter how hard I try."

The fish froze when my hand did. Sylphiel, too, stopped her utensil in midair.

"You *can't?*" I repeated.

He nodded. "Without the aid of magic, can humans breathe underwater? In that very sense we cannot answer that question." His voice dropped after that, a pained smile curling his lips. "It's pathetic, isn't it? Even we find it to be so."

I suddenly realized something. The guy had self-awareness—as the high priest of Sairaag, and as a person. He also knew that Phibrizzo had constructed him and that he lived a fleeting existence. If Phibrizzo was controlling his actions, I could phrase my questions right and get a ton of info out of him.

Maybe I shouldn't, I decided after a minute. It would be cruel to do that to the high priest, and he probably couldn't give me anything but the information Phibrizzo *wanted* me to know.

I sighed and sunk in my chair. Without any better ideas, I went back to eating dinner.

★★★

I moved my things into Sylphiel's room that evening. Since I was staying in there with her, I picked the nearest chair and sank into it with a sigh. I stared out at the city through the open window.

"So?" I asked after a while, throwing a weary glance her way. "What are you planning to do now?"

Distant city noises and a cool breeze blew in from the window. Sylphiel, still standing in front of the doorway, turned her eyes away.

"Do?" she asked. "I … I wish I could save Mister Gourry, but the truth is I've done nothing but wander around since I arrived here. And now that I've been unable to do what I set out to do before you arrived …"

She swallowed. "Miss Lina?" she asked quietly. "If Hellmaster uses Gourry to force you into using the forbidden spell, do you

honestly think you'll cast it?"

Silence stretched out between us. There was no easy answer to that one, so it took me a while to decide what to say "I don't know," I mumbled at last. "If you'd asked me that before I knew the true nature of the Lord of Nightmares, I'd probably have just vowed to cast it and not let it run amok. But now, to be honest… I'm not sure I can control the completed version."

"Then …" Sylphiel gave me a pleading look. I slowly shook my head.

"I already said it, Sylphiel—I'm not abandoning Gourry."

Sylphiel looked to the floor. "I suppose not," she breathed.

We both got quiet again. For a while, the only sounds in the room were the light shuffle of the breeze and the faint sounds from outside.

I was the one to break the silence. "Let's go," I said firmly.

Sylphiel looked up. "Excuse me?"

"To the building. Let's check it out one more time." I let a breath out of the side of my mouth. "I doubt I can get in, but it sure beats being stuck in a room and hashing out 'what ifs.' "

Sylphiel stared at me a second. Then, slowly, she gave a faint smile.

"I … suppose," she admitted. "I'll go with you, Miss Lina."

"Good." I stood up and turned to the door, my mantle fluttering out behind me. "Now let's get our butts back there."

★★★

By the time we reached Phibrizzo's building, a surprise was waiting for us.

"What the hell?" I breathed, staring dazedly at the structure. Sylphiel, by my side, was just as perplexed as I was.

"The door's open," she noted quietly "Um, why is the door open?"

You heard it, kids—after all that, *the freaking door was open.*

We approached the doorway cautiously. It was just like that invitation I'd expected from Phibrizzo in the first place.

It didn't make any sense. The place had rejected us with warped space that morning—why suddenly let us in? I doubted it had time-controlled access or anything. The whole situation was getting more frustrating and stupid.

"Why was it shut earlier?" Sylphiel asked, as if I hadn't already asked myself that a million times.

"Maybe they were getting the red carpet ready," I answered dryly. "But whatever the case, I think they're

ready for us. What says 'come in and find me' more than an open door?"

She hummed an affirmative and cleared her throat. "Well," she said. "Then I'm going in with you."

I figured that was coming.

I gave her a pained smile. “Let me guess,” I said. “You’re coming no matter what I say.”

She gave me a pained smile back. “Yes.”

I rolled my shoulders and turned back to the door. *Okay, Hellmaster*, I thought. *You wanted me here, so here I come.* I took a deep breath, braced myself, and stepped inside the door.

Tap.

My foot hit the inside of the building like in any other doorway No warped space, no nothing. I slowly walked inside, Sylphiel a half step behind me.

We’d entered some kind of unexciting corridor. The gray-colored walls, identical to those on the outside of the building, arced forward and to the sides like a spread-out hand.

“Okay.” Without hesitation, I headed for the right. Sylphiel frantically tried to follow my steps. “H-how do you know that’s the right way?” she asked.

“I don’t,” I answered simply “But they probably all lead to the same place. Phibrizzo probably split the path to make us separate, or agonize over our choice, or get all worked up like we’ve been doing all along. So why worry? He’ll make sure I get to him; we’re not gonna wander in here forever.”

Sylphiel thought about that a minute, then gave a hesitant nod. “All right,” she said, obviously still worried.

The two of us walked silently down the dim corridor. You’d expect a place like that to get darker the farther in, but there was no

lamp or magic light around—just a dim, consistent brightness. Not that the walls had phosphorescent moss on them or anything. There was just some kind of … moderate mix of light and dark in the area, making our surroundings dim.

After a while, we finally came across something to break the monotony—a door in the building's interior wall. It was a really normal-looking door, probably made of the same material everything else was. It had a doorknob. Not the greeting card I'd expected, but a regular, plain doorknob.

It worked the same way. "I think we're supposed to go in," I commented.

Sylphiel gave me a small nod. I slowly turned the doorknob and the door opened without a sound.

The room beyond was pretty strange. A rounded pillar stood in the center of the huge circular room. Or was it a pillar? It was pretty thick around, and it connected the ceiling to the floor.

"What… is that?" Sylphiel whispered.

A figure seemed to float in the center of a pale blue crystal. I stared at it, confused … and then realized what I was looking at. I sucked in a breath

"Mister Gourry?!" Sylphiel cried. She ran to the crystal and pressed her hands against it.

My palms began to sweat. It was Gourry, all right, floating in the crystal with his eyes calmly closed. I honestly couldn't tell if he was okay or not. *Oh, man.*

"Mister Gourry!" Sylphiel cried, her fists pounding on the crystal's surface. "Mister Gourry, please!" He didn't even twitch. I doubted he could hear her. "Don't bother," came a boyish voice from inside the crystal pillar. "That's just an image, you know."

I froze. Gourry's form suddenly shuddered, warped, and vanished. The next instant, a small silhouette took his place within the crystal.

"Phibrizzo," I snapped.

Sylphiel gasped. "Wh-what?" she breathed as she stepped back from the crystal. "You mean … that little *boy?*"

Phibrizzo smiled brightly at her. "Nice to meet you," he chirped. "I don't know your relation to Lina Inverse, but are you what humans call a 'friend'?"

Sylphiel's mouth fell open, I could see her start to tremble. "Y-you're …"

"I think she said it already—I'm Hellmaster Phibrizzo. I'm one of Lord Ruby Eye Shabranigdu's five retainers, the master of this Palace of Hell and of Sairaag, City of Ghosts." He gave a little bow. "I doubt we'll know each other long, but it's a pleasure to meet you."

I tried to fight off the chill that ran up my spine. "What did you do to Sairaag?!" I demanded. "What happened to Flagohn and all the people here?!"

He smiled again. "That tree," he said simply, "broke into pieces when I arrived. I guess it grew by absorbing miasma, but absorbing

my miasma broke it. Since normal humans couldn't get close to something like that, I built the city and then stuffed away all the miasma nearby"

I thought back to the Miasma Forest.

So *that* was why the miasma there had been neutralized.

"After that, I used the hole the tree left to build this Palace of Hell."

I swallowed. "And the people?" I asked. "Are they illusions?"

"Those?" Phibrizzo shrugged. "All I did was summon and give physical form to the souls of a bunch of people who died here recently. I put a few restrictions on them, though."

Sylphiel covered her mouth. "Then Father…" she gasped in a broken voice.

"He died a long time ago," Phibrizzo said with cruel indifference. "They may have will, but they're still my puppets. Don't tell me you didn't notice."

Then … they were ghosts. Souls given physical form were ghosts. Sylphiel's father, the lady at the shop, and all those people in the streets were *ghosts*.

Phibrizzo had taken inspiration from Sairaag's nickname and had made a real City of Ghosts.

I gritted my teeth. "You have bad taste," I spat. "Was keeping us out of here this morning just another one of your schemes?"

Phibrizzo nodded from inside the crystal. "Sure," he said.

“Playing … ‘petty tricks’ or whatever you call them can be a lot of fun. You should’ve seen your face when you’d realized you’d been tricked!”

“Your Rashatt thing was a bust, though.” I glared daggers at him.

“Oh … that.” He winced a little. “I was glad to have him as my fetch-boy after Gaav was destroyed, but I never thought you’d beat him so fast. What a bad actor, huh? I almost feel sorry for Gaav.”

Sylphiel suddenly clenched her fists. “Never mind all that!” she screamed. “What about Mister Gourry? Is he safe?!” “The man? He’s fine; he’s in suspended animation inside a crystal I created.” Phibrizzo raised an eyebrow at Sylphiel. “So does that mean he’s your … ?”

“That’s none of your business!” Sylphiel yelled. Phibrizzo shrugged. “Whatever; I don’t care. He’s in the innermost part of the crystal pillar that runs through the Palace of Hell. If you think you have a chance at getting him back, go ahead and get him.”

“Oh!” Phibrizzo added, almost as an afterthought. “Since I’m going through all this trouble, there’s one more thing I wanted to show you.”

He snapped his fingers.

Phibrizzo’s form vanished from inside the crystal.

An image appeared in his place: a guy and a girl, both wandering aimlessly through familiar gray corridors. I blinked. “Is that Amelia and Zel?!” I exclaimed.

“They came here yesterday,” Phibrizzo’s voice called from

somewhere. “But they were a little early.”

“What’d you do to them?!”

“Relax,” Phibrizzo said. “I didn’t kill them—yet. I want to first teach them that you humans are *ants* next to me.”

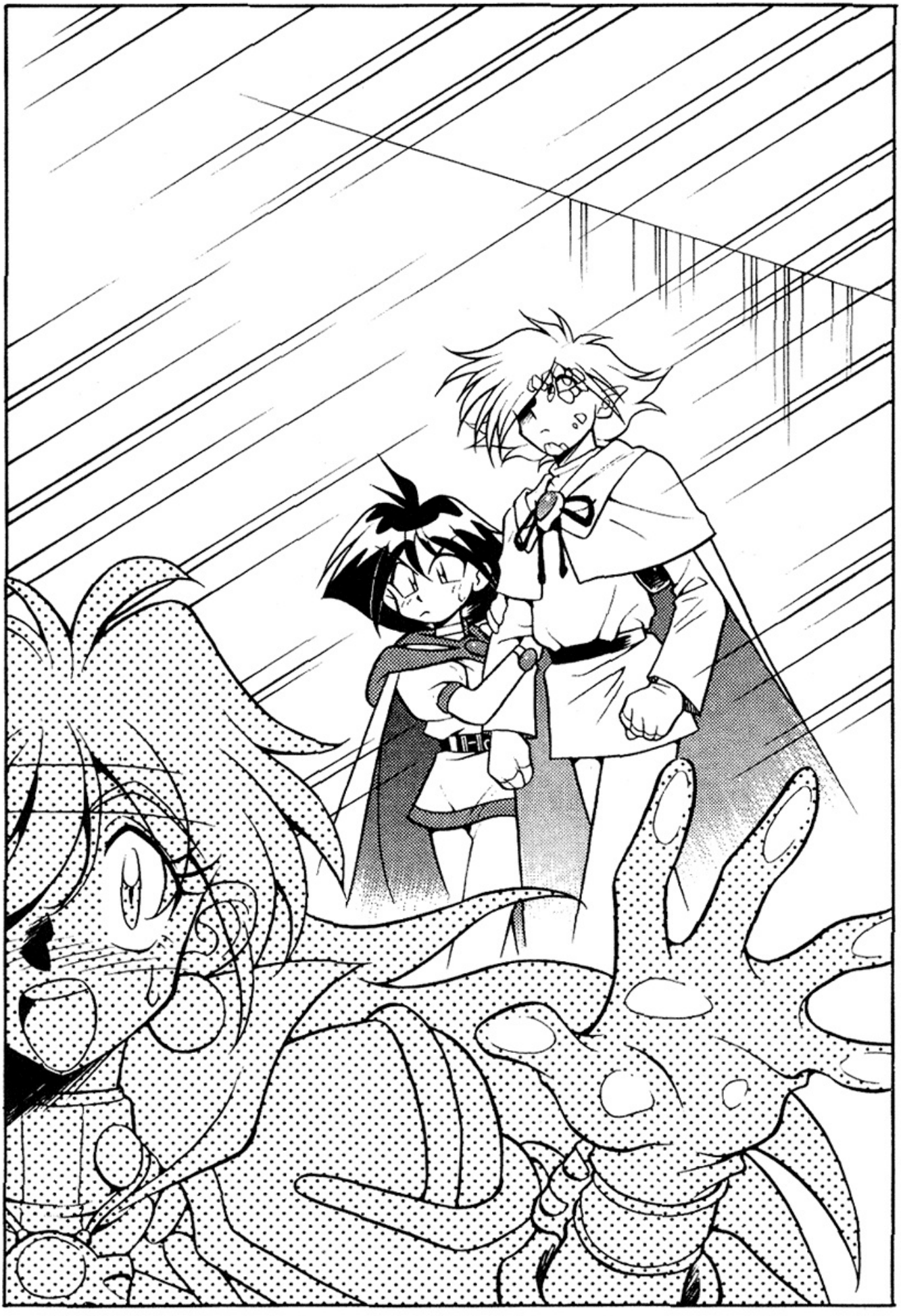
Sylphiel looked up from staring at the image. “Have they been wandering in circles in this place?” she asked breathlessly. “Since yesterday?!”

“Sure. But I tinkered with time, too. In their eyes, they just walked in a little while ago.”

Sylphiel recoiled. “You can control time?!”

“He’s lying.” I didn’t move my hard gaze from the crystal, but I also didn’t want Sylphiel to panic. “He probably just threw off their sense of time and slowed their body functions. That means they don’t *feel* time.”

Phibrizzo made a humming sound. “Well, sure, if you want to bore people with *details*. Anyway, speaking of time—it’s about time those two joined us.”



The Amelia and Zel in the image suddenly stopped walking. A door blocked their path; although there was nobody in the hallway, the door slowly opened on its own. Amelia and Zel glanced at each other, hesitated, then finally walked through.

The crystal's display conveniently switched again, this time showing us what Amelia and Zel saw. They were in a broad, rounded room that looked a lot like ours. A little Ways ahead, a small silhouette stood behind the crystal pillar that ran from the floor to the ceiling.

I tried to stay calm. *I don't like the looks of this*.

"So you were waiting for us," Zelgadiss said lowly, his voice hanging in the air of our room. "Sorry about the delay."

The Phibrizzo in the image smiled. "Oh, I'm not waiting for you. Lina Inverse is about to join us from above."

Amelia jumped. "Lina?!" she cried. "Already?!" "Already." Phibrizzo's smile turned sinister. "And now I can show you all how futile this fight is."

"Oh, no!" Amelia, despite the fact that she was trapped in the clutches of Hellmaster in his Palace of Hell, slammed one fist against her waist and pointed at Phibrizzo confidently. One of her eyebrows raised in accusation.

I resisted the urge to slap my forehead. *Dammit, Amelia*.

"No matter how much power you possess," she declared, "no glory will ever come to Evil! Know that with the Fires of Justice that burn within each of us, the day your scheme is realized is eternally

postponed!"

Phibrizzo hummed again. "Does that make your party 'Allies of Justice' or whatever?"

Amelia froze, her finger still pointed. She obviously deliberated over whether or not she could call us all "do-gooders."

"Y-yes," she said at last, nodding her head firmly. "All except Lina."

Hey! I growled at the image.

Amelia thought I hadn't heard that! I mean, I don't consider myself a superhero or anything, but *her* saying it was just rude.

"This 'Justice' you're always talking about," Phibrizzo said to her. "You mean human justice, right? We demons think returning the world to nothingness is justice."

"It's useless to try and trick me with nonsense!" Amelia shot back. "A heart that believes in Justice will never stray from the path!"

"Nonsense? We're two sides of the same coin. You want existence; we, destruction. That's the difference between us."

Phibrizzo crossed his arms. "You might say that there are a lot of inconsistencies to our demonic existence. But nothingness has nothing but nothing itself. We choose a *very* consistent, perfect system of complete darkness— that's what makes us Mazoku."

Amelia didn't even blink. "I said I'm not listening!"

Or you don't understand, I silently added.

“Besides!” she added. “If you want destruction, why don’t you destroy yourselves?! No one will mind!”

Hellmaster sighed. “You don’t get it,” he said. “We don’t just want destruction for *us*, we want it for everything. It doesn’t mean anything unless the world itself is destroyed.” He shrugged. “Not that I really expected you to understand. *We* don’t understand why you want to *continue* existing … there’s been that fundamental gap in our understanding all along.”

Zel spread his feet. “Then we’ll have to settle this by force,” he concluded darkly.

“Right.” Phibrizzo perked up again. “But to be honest, it’s stupid to fight you head on; I’d just blast you to bits before you could chant a single spell. Since that’s boring and lame, want to play a game instead?”

Amelia paused. “Game?”

“Sure. The rules are simple: both of you face me and attack, and I can’t do anything but defend. I won’t even touch you. If you can destroy me, you win; if you can’t, I win.” Zelgadiss narrowed his eyes. “Those are … generous conditions,” he said after a second. “If we win, do we get Gourry?”

Phibrizzo smiled and nodded.

The crystal behind him made a strange little noise before displaying an image of Gourry.

“He’s in suspended animation inside the crystal pillar in the lowest chamber of this Palace. He’ll be released if you beat me, and

you can go take him home."

"And if we lose, we die."

Phibrizzo laughed and shook his head. His eyes locked on Zel.

"If you lose," he said simply, "you'll know that humans can't beat me. That's enough for me."

That's enough?

As I watched Phibrizzo smile again, I realized what he was doing.

He wanted to show me. The thing with Amelia and Zel was to prove that I needed to use the Giga Slave on him.

Amelia shook out an arm, then pointed at Phibrizzo again. "Fine!" she shouted. "You'll regret your reckless, overconfident speech soon enough!"

Oh, the irony.

Amelia and Zel began chanting spells. Phibrizzo, creepily enough, looked almost giddy to take them.

I'd seen enough. "Sylphiel," I said, throwing a glance her way. "We're going!"

She nodded firmly. "Right!"

We ran for the crystal pillar while Phibrizzo played his twisted game with Amelia and Zel. I wasn't about to just sit there while he screwed with their heads. I wanted to find and save Gourry, obviously, but I didn't expect us to get that far yet—just hooking

back up with Amelia and Zel would be a good start.

I swung around the pillar, expecting to find some clue about how to follow Phibrizzo there. What I did find made me stop.

There was a hole open in the floor with stairs leading down.

It was stupidly easy. I hesitated a second, but then realized that the Palace of Hell existed according to

Phibrizzo's will. If he wanted us down, there'd be stairs leading down.

But it won't lead to Gourry.

I figured that the stairs would bring us to his "demonstration of power." I was getting pretty sick of him jerking us around, but what could I do? Besides, that meant we'd probably find Amelia and Zel.

Sylphiel and I nodded at each other. Without saying a word, we ran down the stairs that led to Phibrizzo.

A Darkness, Deeper Than Night

"There's a legend probably everyone s heard about—the one that says the world is a round plate resting on top of a staff in the Sea of Chaos. I never used to believe that story.

But after learning a few things from the Claire Bible, my thinking had started to change. It seemed that, in a sense, the legend was at least half true.

"Ra Tilt!" Amelia's voice echoed around us in the empty room. The stairs had led Sylphiel and me to a room constructed exactly like our last one, complete with crystal pillar in the center and an image inside it. We watched Amelia cast her spell to start Phibrizzo's "game."

But her spell didn't activate.

"Huh?!" Amelia took a step back, shock written across her face. Phibrizzo just gave her one of his boyish smiles.

"I don't need to chant a defense spell against some thing *that* small," he explained. "I can just think about neutralizing your spell's power, and *poof*! No activation."

It sucked. It sucked *big time*. Even Gaav had chanted a quick spell with his roar or whatever to neutralize our magic. Phibrizzo just had to think it.

We're so screwed.

Ignoring the futility of it all, Zelgadiss finished chanting his own

spell.

"Ra Tilt!" he yelled.

But that didn't work, either. It was obvious that the only way Amelia or Zel could possibly hit Phibrizzo was if they caught him by surprise—and they didn't have many openings for that in a direct fight.

Maybe I could hit him when I ran into the room? It wasn't a bad idea, but it lacked one important detail: I wasn't in the room.

Let's get to the room, I thought as Sylphiel and I ran down the next flight of stairs that was, without creativity, behind the crystal pillar.

★★★

There's a legend everyone's probably heard about—the one that says the Lord of Nightmares, Demon Lord of Demon Lords, fell from Heaven and shook the Sea of Chaos. When I went to the Kingdom of Dilse with a certain girl from back home, an old prophet told her that one.

But it was wrong.

Maybe that was because he got it from an incomplete Claire Bible manuscript, or maybe his interpretation was just off. But it was wrong.

The new set of stairs led Sylphiel and me down to another identical room. I was starting to think we weren't actually getting anywhere.

This looks like the same room over and over, I thought angrily. It was like all that crap that'd kept us out of the building that morning! Phibrizzo's mind games were really starting to get on my nerves.

But it wasn't like we had a choice—we had to keep going down.

Amelia and Zel, in the meantime, had started trying other attack spells on Phibrizzo. Ra Tilt was getting them nowhere fast.

"Elmekia Lance!" Amelia cried.

"Goz Vu Rou!" Zelgadiss shouted.

Phibrizzo batted away Amelia's lance of light with one hand and stomped the shadow Zel had sent running along the floor. He raised an eyebrow.

Amelia and Zel didn't stand a chance. The two of them were starting to look worried and hopeless, which was, I'm sure, Phibrizzo's aim.

"Fireball!" Amelia tried, either without any hope or just as a panic reaction.

Since a fireball was sure to do absolutely nothing to a Mazoku, Phibrizzo just laughed. He flashed her a pained smile and didn't even bother to dodge or block.

BOOM!

The fireball hit Phibrizzo and sent explosive light in all directions. During the distraction, Zel launched another spell.

"Ra Tilt!" he yelled.

Unfortunately, the spell still didn't activate. The smoke from the fireball vanished, revealing Phibrizzo again.

"Wow," he said. "Were you trying to blind me with the fireball? That's so … crude."

Zel gritted his teeth. "Fine," he hissed, drawing his broadsword from his back.

He started chanting another spell.

"Astral Vine!"

After embedding magic power into his sword, he charged straight for Phibrizzo.

DNN!

When Zel swung downward, Phibrizzo didn't move. In a definite surprise, Zel's sword sliced apart Phibrizzo!

Or *through* Phibrizzo, actually.

But it made sense—Phibrizzo was a spiritual being to begin with, so he used some method to materialize his body. He'd probably just weakened the materialization's power to avoid Zel's attack.

Phibrizzo didn't blink. "And?" he asked.

Zel stared at him dumbly.

Amelia kept trying, but I could see her going pale.

Phibrizzo had said everything had been separated from a single source. If that is literally the case …

The game was ending. Amelia and Zel weren't exhausted or anything, but the ways they could attack were being cut down one by one. They couldn't land a single real hit. They eventually took a break from casting and just glared at Phibrizzo.

Only one thing could break the balance: us getting there.

★★★

Sylphiel and I ended up running down so many staircases that I lost track of the damn things. The rooms were all identical, and thus *endlessly frustrating*, but we eventually hit one that didn't have a downward staircase.

"They have to be around here somewhere!" I called as we ran out of the room. There was a corridor outside, with stairs at the end of it. Although I was definitely mad to see MORE STAIRS, the fact tha we were in a different place meant we were probably close to the others. I wanted that surprise attack when we finally reached Phibrizzo, so I started chanting a Dragon Slave while we ran down that corridor.

We didn't have to go much farther. At the end of the new stairs was a new corridor, with an open door in the interior. Inside I could see a small, dark figure facing off against two people whose backs were to us.

There!

I bolted into the room as fast as my feet could carry me. The instant Phibrizzo's eyes shifted to me, I released my spell.

"Dragon Slave!" I practically screamed.

Aaaand it didn't activate.

DAMMIT! He'd seen it coming. How had he seen it coming?!

"I saw that coming," Phibrizzo confirmed smugly. If I had the ability, I would've marched across the room and wrung his tiny neck.

That was when Sylphiel surprised us all.

"Dragon Slave!" she cried.

I whipped to her, my eyes practically bugging out of my head. "Sylphiel?!" I blurted. A surprise Dragon Slave, from *her* of all people?!

"What?!" Phibrizzo, awesomely enough, seemed as shocked as I was. Even better, he didn't have time to neutralize the spell. The crimson light of the Dragon Slave streaked across the room.

"Ra Tilt!" Amelia and Zel called in unison.

Phibrizzo cried out in alarm. He'd probably meant to use his spiritual power to subdue the Dragon Slave, but Amelia and Zel didn't give him any breathing room. The two Ra Tilts activated.

FWOOOM! Hellmaster Phibrizzo's entire body was enveloped in flame. It wasn't the usual blue of Ra Tilt—the fire was white. Then I wondered why it had changed color … and then it hit me. *The Dragon Slave and the Ra Tilts are reacting together!*

"RAAAAAAAAAGH!" Phibrizzo screamed as the white pillar engulfed him. It was the most satisfying sight I'd seen in a long time.

Phibrizzo's body became a black shadow inside the three spells. After a second, it burst apart in the light, leaving no trace of the

demon within the white flame.

The spells finally disappeared. Nothing of Phibrizzo was left when they went.

Whoa ... For a few minutes, nobody said anything. We stared at where Phibrizzo had been standing, feeling a little bit victorious but mostly just confused.

"Did we … get him?" Zel finally murmured to break the silence.

Sylphiel swallowed. "Who knows?" she replied as she looked around the area. I could tell she hadn't let her guard down yet.

I didn't sense any presence in the area anymore. It was a step in the right direction, but it didn't necessarily confirm anything.

Just then, Amelia shouted something and pointed to the crystal. I turned to see a figure emerge from the crystal pillar.

Crap! The four of us took fighting stances and started chanting spells. If that bastard was coming back, we'd be ready for him!

But the figure eventually became clearer, and we could see who it really was. It definitely wasn't the return of Phibrizzo.

It was Gourry.

"Mister Gourry!" Sylphiel gasped.

He emerged slowly from the crystal, almost as if someone were pushing him out. He slipped out and fell toward the floor.

"Gourry!" Before I could move or say a word, Sylphiel bolted for Gourry and caught him as he fell. She gently supported his much

bigger frame.

"Gourry!"

I opened my mouth, but I suddenly had no idea what to say.

Wh-what? I thought. Something was choking me, for some reason. My feet froze to the floor, completely refusing to move forward. I could only stare at Sylphiel with Gourry in her arms.

"Uh," I eventually managed to croak. "Is he, uh … is he okay?"

Without even bothering to turn her head, Sylphiel nodded.

He's ... he's okay.

I sighed as the tension flooded out of my body all at once. He was okay. Gourry was back, and he was gonna be okay.

"Mister Gourry," Sylphiel breathed. "Mister Gourry!"

Possibly because Sylphiel was calling him so much, Gourry suddenly groaned.

"Nn…"

If he was coming around that quickly, he had to be all right. It was definitely a relief.

Gourry blinked. He seemed to get a hold of himself pretty fast, because almost immediately he was looking around with a confused expression on his face.

"Where … am I?" he murmured.

I clenched my fists. If he was all right, then that meant I could let him have it.

“SHUT YOUR HOLE, GENIUS!” I shouted as I leaped.

WHACK!

My boot landed a direct hit on his hollow skull.

Sylphiel gasped. “Miss Lina!” she cried.

Gourry grabbed his head. “What’re you doing?!” he exclaimed.

After the initial wave of relief, unchecked rage began pouring out of me. All the anger, frustration, and outrage came out at once in a fiery ball of seething hot *kill*.

“Do you realize how much you freaked us out?!” I screeched. “I know Phibrizzo’s badass, but you didn’t even put up a *fight* when he grabbed you! What are you, a damsel in distress?!”

Gourry’s mouth hung open like a reprimanded puppy’s. “Wha … ?”

I spun around so my back was to him. “Whatever!” I snarled. “Just consider yourself lucky that everyone’s still in one piece. And thank Sylphiel—if it wasn’t for her, you’d still be rotting in that crystal! We had no clue how to save you.”

“Huh?” I could hear how bewildered Gourry sounded, but I couldn’t see his expression since I’d turned around. I suddenly realized that I might not *want* to see it.

I heard Sylphiel shift. “Mister Gourry,” she said shakily, “thank goodness you’re safe.”

Gourry paused. After a second, I heard one of his fists hit the palm of his other hand. “Now I get it,” he announced. “That guy totally kidnapped me!”

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!

“HOW COULD YOU FORGET THAT?!” we all screamed at him in unison.

I realized that everything I'd yelled at him had probably fallen on deaf ears. The idiot hadn't even realized what had happened to him.

All in all, it was a very Gourry moment.

"By the way" Gourry said, obviously—and appropriately—skimming over what a moron he was. "What happened to that guy?"

Sylphiel bit her lip. "If Mister Gourry's been released, then that must mean we won. And I really didn't think we'd defeated him at the time."

Amelia let a loud breath out of her nose and slammed her hands on her hips. "Of course we beat him!" she announced. "Our Justice-loving hearts destroyed his Evil!"

"Easy," I said. "Remember how ridiculously powerful Phibrizzo is."

Amelia and Sylphiel went quiet. Amelia even cleared her throat and looked away.

"Either way." Zelgadiss looked around. "Since we got Gourry back, there's no point in sticking around here any more."

Sylphiel nodded. "Agreed," she said.

Amelia nodded more enthusiastically. "No objections!" she declared.

"I don't get it."

I had to clench my fists to stop them from slapping Gourry.

"I'll explain later!" I snapped. "For now, we're leaving! The

stairs are that way."

I strode out of the room and down the faint gray corridor, back in the direction we'd come in. Amelia, Zel, and Gourry followed with Sylphiel bringing up the rear. I was just about to go up the first flight of stairs when I remembered something.

"Hang on, Gourry." I turned back to look at him. "What happened to the Sword of Light? Or … the Goln Nova, I guess it's really called."

Gourry opened his mouth, then closed it again to think. Something smelled like burning rubber.

"I dunno," he said at last.

Big surprise.

"After I got caught by the sword's tentacle thingies," he explained, "I passed out and woke up inside this place. When the tentacles let me go, there was this blue cloud stuff all around me. I passed out again and didn't wake up until you guys got here."

I digested all of my information for a minute. Since Phibrizzo had said the sword was a Mazoku from another world or whatever, he'd probably returned it to its home. And I had to admit that as much as I loved the Sword of Light, I wasn't in a hurry to use it again now that I knew it was a demon. I don't like waving dangerous things around until I know what I'm doing, and I'd done that plenty of times already with the Sword of Light.

I started back up the stairs. Either way, I had to give up the Goln Nova.

“Now that you mention it,” said a familiar voice, “you should give up the Goln Nova.”

I froze.

What the… hell?

It wasn’t just the voice. I was expecting another corridor above the stairs, but reaching there just revealed a huge, round, faintly gray room with a giant crystal pillar running up and down through the center.

Phibrizzo stood in front of the pillar, pleased as a kitty cat.

Dammit!

“So you’re still alive, Phibrizzo,” I hissed as my body tightened.

Phibrizzo gave me a broad smile, the result eerie on his little face.

Just to be clear, I wasn’t at all surprised—it takes more than a few good hits to destroy a guy like Phibrizzo. What did confuse me was that I’d called out his name to warn everyone behind me and no one had said anything. I’d at least expected Amelia to start a speech about…

I suddenly noticed something very disturbing. The presences of everyone behind me had vanished at some point.

I jerked my head around. Sure enough, nobody was following me up the stairs.

My heart dropped to my stomach.

“I bent space a little,” Phibrizzo said smugly. “The invitation’s only for one, Lina Inverse.” He raised his right hand and snapped his fingers.

With a faint flicker, the crystal pillar at the center of the room showed Gourry and the others looking around and getting nervous in faint gray corridors.

“I twisted the space around the stairs, since you’re the only one I want here. They’ll never find you, no matter how desperate they are.”

I clenched my fists. “Where am I?!” I shouted. Phibrizzo smiled. “This is the lowest chamber of the Palace of Hell. We’re five rooms lower than where we fought before.” He paused. “I was surprised how well you did back there, by the way. I never expected that girl to come out and use the Dragon Slave.”

I kept my feet glued to the floor. “I didn’t know Sylphiel could use something like that, either.”

“Huh. Well, it’s a good thing I left part of my spirit body behind as a decoy and rushed out of there. It would’ve hurt more otherwise.” He shrugged. I released the man you call Gourry as a reward for putting up such a good fight… for humans, anyway.”

I gritted my teeth. “How incredibly sweet.”

“I can see that you realize how unhurt I really am.” “Yeah,” I answered. “It would’ve been strange if this building had changed like it did with you destroyed, since this place exists according to your will. And I know that it takes more than a surprise hit to get rid of you.”

Phibrizzo brightened. “Exactly! Well, as I said, you all did pretty well for humans—but in the end, really, that’s all you can be.”

“And I remember you mentioning this earlier.”

As Phibrizzo spoke, the space in front of his chest shuddered and twisted. The Sword of Light—er, Goln Nova, appeared out of thin air.

“I’d better give this back to Dark Star.” Phibrizzo closed his eyes and started murmuring a quiet spell. After a second, an awful noise ripped through the air.

RIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!

It was the hard, sharp sound of trembling metal. It got louder and louder until the air, my eardrums, and the liquid in my brain were all shuddering so bad that I thought I’d go crazy.

SHUT IT OFF! I thought desperately as my fingernails dug into my palms.

And then, it was gone. Strike that—the sound wasn’t gone, I just couldn’t hear it anymore. Since the air was still quivering, the pitch had just passed beyond the range of human ears.

The Goln Nova suddenly turned a deep, inky black. It flowed into thin air, dissolved, and vanished. The silent noise disappeared along with it.

“Okay.” Phibrizzo opened his eyes and dusted his hands. “That takes care of that.”

I wondered *what in the hell* Phibrizzo had just done.

“Now that I’ve returned that to Dark Star, where were we? Oh, yeah.” He smiled. “The protocol’s a little off, but who cares, right? Let’s get to the point.”

Phibrizzo turned his stare to the image of my four teammates inside the crystal. He snapped his fingers.

Blue mist shot up from under their feet.

Son of a—

I could hear them shouting in surprise as the mist enveloped each of them. There was a weird, loud crackle, and then they were all sealed in cryptic blue crystals.

“Y-you bastard!” I yelled, trying to keep my voice steady. “What’d you do to them?!”

I already had a pretty good idea. That was probably exactly how Gourry’d been sealed to begin with—they were suspended now just like he’d been then. That meant the only way I could get them out was if I did what Phibrizzo wanted or killed him straight up.

The method was the same for both.

“Now, Lina Inverse.” Phibrizzo gave me a cocky and disturbingly cheerful smile. “What will you do?”

I broke out into a cold sweat. I growled and glared at him, but didn’t say anything. “I can easily kill all four of them if I feel like it. I can even do it now! All it takes is cracking the crystal a little.” He raised an eyebrow “You’re the only one who can stop that, and it means you have to defeat me.

“But I’m sure you already know that normal spells can’t damage me at all. And if you try that blade of darkness spell you used on Gaav, I’ll just fade into space and run away. That thing *hurts*, you know.”

I didn’t say anything. For a pause that felt like it lasted forever, I didn’t say anything.

I sighed. “Fine,” I hissed through my teeth. “I’ll give you what you want—you’re getting the Giga Slave!”

Phibrizzo’s lips curled up. “Great!” he practically chirped. “So you finally realized what I want you to do.” “At this point? Obviously.” I leveled my hard gaze on him. “But why go through all this to use me? You can just cast the spell and make it run amok yourself. You’re aiming to *go* down with the world either way”

Phibrizzo’s smile turned weak. “I’d like to avoid the trouble, if I can. Unlike the lesser demons and brass demons that inhabit animals of this world, we pureblood Mazoku are what you could call spiritual life forms. For us, casting spells that draw on the power of other beings would be the same as rejecting our own power. It’s suicide.

“We can cast Shamanic spells for a particular purpose, but drawing power for a spell from other high-ranking demons, or *that being*, would place our own existence in jeopardy before we could even complete the spell. That’s why ‘humans,’ who don’t understand the real horror of ‘spells,’ lack those limitations and are better for the job.” He shrugged. “But I think we’ve talked about this enough, don’t you? It’s time to get to business.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Unless you’d rather I break your friends apart one by one?”

“I get it,” I snapped. *SHUT UP*, I wanted to add.

I didn’t know if it would work against him. I didn’t. But I still started by drawing power from the talismans and casting the Amplification spell. Then I strung the Chaos Words together and chanted the demonic verses.

“Thou who art darker than night,

Thou who art deeper than night,

Thou of the Sea of Chaos,

The Golden King of Darkness …”

“What?!” I heard Phibrizzo shout. “What are you doing?!”

He’d heard what I was casting. And for the very first time, I heard panic in Phibrizzo’s voice. I was chanting the incomplete version of the Giga Slave. Since I was borrowing power from the talismans, I was sure I could control it. I could destroy Phibrizzo.

“I call upon thee,

I pledge myself to thee;

Let us stand together.

And let the fools

Who stand before us

Suffer the fate of destruction …!”

A cloud of darkness spawned and drifted around me finally

converging in the palm of my outstretched right hand. The spell power bulged and warped as I desperately tried to keep it from running wild. Even with the power of the talismans, the exhaustion was severe. I was keenly aware that "controlling the spell" meant that my magical power and physical strength were being drained, almost as if my life itself were being whittled away.

Bewildered, Phibrizzo backed up a step as the spell drawing power from the Lord of Nightmares completed.

Now.

"GIGA SLAVE!" I screamed.

The ball of darkness before my open palm shrunk to vanish into thin air. The next instant, it transferred into my target: the scattering void.

"RAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

Phibrizzo's scream echoed off the walls. Fire spewed from inside his body, eventually turning into a pillar of black flame that enveloped his entire form.

Phibrizzo roared as space creaked apart. The shudders of the Palace of Hell seemed to make the wind sob.

My knees buckled. After all the draining of my magical and physical strength. I was almost running on empty. My shoulders sagged forward and tossed my hair onto my chest; I vaguely noticed a new silver streak woven in.

Crap. The hair was a sign that I'd used too much life energy. Well, that and the fact that I could barely stand—I wanted nothing

more at that moment than a pillow and a flat surface. But I couldn't lose consciousness yet, obviously. I had to watch my spell through to the end.

I turned my bleary eyes upward. After a second, the pillar of black flame vanished.

Hellmaster Phibrizzo was gone.

But something wasn't right. I'd been expecting a destructive blast opposite me after the flame pillar burst. When I'd first used that spell, it had been enough to turn a piece of seacoast into a bay.

If the pillar had just *ended*, some kind of power had rebuffed my spell.

"N-now you've done it."

As terrifying as my worst nightmares, a gray cloud emerged from the floor. It slowly took the form of Hellmaster Phibrizzo.

I knew it, I thought as my heart sank. I was so tired that all I could do was stare at him in resigned depression.

"I really didn't see that one coming," Phibrizzo said, his eyes blazing angrily. "And suppressing that spell really hurt!"

I panted and groaned from my position on the floor. He'd probably used the same method as earlier: leaving a piece of his astral body behind to buffer his main body from the offensive power of the spell.

And after all that! What was I supposed to do now?!

Phibrizzo glared at me balefully, then shifted his gaze to my four

friends displayed in the crystal pillar. “You did chant the spell,” he admitted darkly, “but I didn’t want the incomplete one. And I never said I’d let them go once you cast it, anyway.”

Panic seized me. “What?!” I croaked.

Phibrizzo snorted. “Then I’ll return the favor a little. You get one broken friend.”

No!

“But who to choose …” Phibrizzo trailed off, rubbing his chin. “Maybe I’ll go with the original plan and take care of the big man?” His eyes leveled on Gourry’s image.

“DON’T!” I screamed.

Phibrizzo stopped. Slowly, infuriatingly, he glanced back at me and flashed a small smile.

No, no, no! was all I could think. He was gonna kill Gourry. He was gonna kill Gourry.

He’s gonna kill Gourry!

There was only one way to stop him. The moment it hit my brain, all my hesitation vanished.

I drew power from the talismans for the Amplification spell, then recited the Chaos Words.

“Thou who art darker than night … ”

As I raised my voice, I felt the last of my energy surge through my limbs. I shakily got to my feet.

Phibrizzo glared coldly at me. “Don’t tell me you’re trying the same thing,” he hissed. “Don’t be an idiot— that’s not going to beat me.”

I ignored him and continued.

“Thou who art deeper than night…”

I didn’t care anymore about the spell going wild or Phibrizzo’s scheme. I didn’t care about anything.

I just wanted to save Gourry. My slime-for-brains, self-appointed guardian Gourry.

“Thou, the quaking Sea of Chaos, the Golden King of Darkness…”

“Oh?!” Phibrizzo suddenly cried, his voice lifting in surprise and joy.

Once upon a time, I’d heard that the Lord of Nightmares—that which had fallen from Heaven into the Sea of Chaos—was the Demon Lord of Demon Lords.

But that was wrong. I knew it was.

The Claire Bible told me that the Sea of Chaos stretched beneath the many worlds was, *itself*, none other than the Lord of Nightmares.

There’s a legend everyone’s probably heard about— the one that says the world is resting on top of a staff in the Sea of Chaos.

But that’s not the right way to put it. It should go more like this:

“The Sea of Chaos itself is the foundation of all existence.

I call upon thee,

I pledge myself to thee;

Let us stand together.

And let the fools

Who stand before us

Suffer the fate of destruction ... !"

For a second time, the darkness—No. Now the *nothingness* spawned. Or was it even that? I was even starting to think that the substance I saw was Chaos itself.

A black something that was way, way beyond human understanding slowly converged in the open palm of my right hand.

I could feel myself being drained again. But this time, it wasn't magical or physical strength —it was my life force, my soul, that was being sucked out toward blackness. Every cell of my body screamed from the pressure.

But I couldn't lose consciousness. I couldn't let the spell run wild. If I lost control … just like Phibrizzo wanted, just like Sylphiel had warned, the entire world would return to nothingness.

THUMP!

I heard a sound as my entire body shuddered.

As my will held the spell back, darkness ate away at that will little by little. The darkness spawned before my right palm continued to vibrate irregularly, growing bigger, little by little.

I can't let him … make it run wild!

I clenched my teeth. As I glared at Phibrizzo, the background trembled and grew hazy in my eyes.

THUMP!

The darkness expanded.

But this time, it reached into my soul.

I can't hold it back.

The moment I thought it, my consciousness sank into the darkness.

And then …

I slowly opened my eyes.

The darkness, about the size of a clenched fist, remained stable at the edge of my outstretched right palm. Directly ahead of it stood Hellmaster Phibrizzo in the form of a boy, a bright smile stretching across his entire face.

"Huh. You controlled the spell—isn't that something?"

Phibrizzo's "voice" reverberated inside my head. He seemed neither panicked nor surprised.

"But don't think that this means you've beaten me. I knew you might be able to control it. After all, you've got the Demon Blood Talismans. I had you obtain them for exactly this moment. "

For a moment, an image of Sairaag City invaded my mind along with Phibrizzo's "voice."

“I still haven’t explained it to you, have I? Why I didn’t let you into this Palace of Hell earlier today.

“I know that I said I materialized the souls of those in the city and gave them physical form. But do you know what material I used? ME. Pretty much everything that exists in this city is my will in material form. In other words—this city and I are one and the same. ”

“Your point?” I said in reply.

“My point?”

A hint of hatred crept into Phibrizzo’s smile. Perhaps I’d spoiled his mood.

“Don’t you get it yet? You ate food this morning! Food that was made out of ME! Everything in this city is me, so now there’s a part of ME inside you!”

“And?” I asked.

“You still don’t get it?!” Phibrizzo’s “voice” yelled angrily. “Listen! It may not be possible to attack you from the outside while you control the Void—but with a portion of my existence already inside you, I can use that to destroy your body from the inside! I can burst your heart open with a mere thought! What do you think will happen if I kill you now and you lose control of the darkness?!”

Sigh.

I let out a loud laugh at Phibrizzo’s complete nonsense.

"Oh, so that doesn't bother you?! Fine! I'll kill you, just like you want! I'll rip your body into pieces!"

But that moment, the power Phibrizzo pushed inside me just… broke apart.

"WHAT?!"

Phibrizzo left my head and shouted his surprise through the air. As I stood, silent, he stumbled back a few steps.

"H-how?!" he cried. "That should've burst your heart! You should be dead! Wh-why aren't you … ?!"

I turned my eyes toward him with absolute indifference.

"Why did you *REVIVE?!*" he screamed.

Yes. He'd killed me. When Phibrizzo's "power" had struck me, my heart had burst and I had died.

However …

"And what of it?" I asked.

My voice momentarily stunned Phibrizzo into silence. Then, finally, he shrieked in fear and fell to the floor.

It seemed he'd finally realized who I really was.

But using an insignificant attack on me without realizing my true identity … it was just so crude.

Phibrizzo was trembling. "It," he blurted, "it c-can't be!"

I slowly raised up the Void.

“I shall grant you Destruction, Hellmaster Phibrizzo,” I said. “You shall have precisely what you desire.” The golden-hued hair of the human Lina Inverse, who had become my center, swayed in the air.

I crushed the Void in my right hand with the greatest of ease. It simultaneously jumped across space and transferred into Phibrizzo’s body.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Hellmaster Phibrizzo screamed. At that same moment, I “saw” him leave an astral fragment within the Void as he fled into the astral plane.

Leaving his tail behind like a lizard was his specialty. But that, too, was absolutely futile.

Through the Void, I chased Phibrizzo with my own power and slipped into the astral plane. When I caught his astral form, he resisted fiercely.

If you want Destruction, I told him, *then yield!*

He only resisted more strongly in response. He was afraid of me. He was confused by me.

I extended a tentacle of Void toward the desperately struggling Phibrizzo.

Normally, I’d have simply run through a foe like Phibrizzo without difficulty. But I couldn’t call forth all the power I pleased, possibly because I possessed a human being.

But I wouldn’t let him escape. Whether or not he realized who I was, he had attacked me.

Destroy!

My consciousness burst open. Tentacles of Void, like roots stretching forth from the earth, ate away at the Palace of Hell and Sairaag City itself.

And then …

Hellmaster Phibrizzo's agonized consciousness burst apart.

★★★

I opened my eyes to see lots of blue sky. I was flat on my back somewhere. After a long pause, I blinked my eyes a few times. Then I—

"Huh?!" I jerked up to a sitting position.

I'm ... I'm... Lina Inverse.

I blurted another sound of surprise. Completely confused about the situation I was in, I jerked my head back and forth to see where I was.

I was at the bottom of some kind of deep crater. Gourry, Zel, Amelia, and Sylphiel were lying nearby, obviously unconscious.

The Palace of Hell was gone. Well, duh— when Phibrizzo had been destroyed, the building he'd created and the city of Sairaag itself had vanished. When it occurred to me to look, I also checked my hair—but it was nothing more than its natural chestnut color.

Then that means ... I was finally starting to realize what had happened. When I ran my eyes over the area again, I suddenly noticed a dark silhouette standing right beside me. Don't ask me

why. Honestly, don't. But I felt strangely relieved to see him there.

"Too bad things didn't work out for you, Xelloss." He'd probably jumped across space. Since I hadn't seen him since he'd vanished from Dragon's Peak, I checked his right arm; it was back in its proper place, as if Gaav had never sliced the thing off. But he was a Mazoku, alter all—who knows how much damage he could recover from.

He smiled at me like he always had.

"I'm not particularly disappointed," he said simply. "After all — it's not my failure, is it?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Jeez, Xelloss. You're the type to ditch your allies with a great big smile on your face." True to form, he answered with another smile. "That, of course, is what makes me a demon."

"So why're you here now? I doubt you're hoping to avenge Phibrizzo."

"Let's not be silly. I was just wondering if you could explain what happened here." He brushed a strand of hair behind his ear. "I don't understand it whatsoever. It really didn't look like you controlled the spell."

I snorted. "You thought I'd just explain it to you?" Xelloss paused and tilted his head a bit. "Maybe," he said at last. "I thought it was worth asking, at least."

That made me laugh. *Typical Xelloss.*

"Funny story," I said, rolling my shoulders, "He just mixed the two of us up."

“Two?” Xelloss repeated.

“I’m the first to admit that it’s weird to have two people in one like that, but whatever. I didn’t win here—I just survived, really.”

Xelloss pursed his lips. “Really.”

“I wasn’t sure what ‘losing control of the spell’ really meant, and I’m pretty sure Phibrizzo didn’t, either. When I *did* lose control, my body was taken over by the Lord of Nightmares.”

Xelloss’ face twisted a little as I said “the Lord of Nightmares.” I ignored it and kept talking.

“Maybe my consciousness and *it* became one at that point, or maybe I was completely absorbed … I remember it pretty well, but I’m not sure about that part. Anyway.

“Phibrizzo attacked me because he didn’t realize I had become it, so it got angry and attacked back. Phibrizzo seemed really confused since he’d attacked it by mistake and it should’ve been an ally of demons. He fought it to the end.”

And before anyone says anything—I know, it’s complicated. But it seemed that Phibrizzo’s fatal mistake was considering it the ally of Mazoku. That explained his shock and resistance when he was attacked.

One could definitely say that demonic existence is close to that of the chaotic Void, but Phibrizzo had said it himself: demons who want destruction and those of us who want existence were originally split off from a single source. In other words, from it. Not just the king of the demons, but the king of everyone.

And hey, everyone knows the rule: when you hit someone, even by mistake, they usually hit you back.

"So, it took offense and crushed Phibrizzo. The stuff from that point on is probably beyond human understanding, but my best take on it is that it was a lot more powerful than Phibrizzo but it couldn't increase its power freely because it had a human at its core. But it went after Phibrizzo anyway, all insulted and ignoring the limits on how much of its own power it could draw at once."

I clapped my hands together, then separated them again. "They slammed together and took each other down."

It was my best guess, anyway. Having used too much power while temporarily controlling me, it had lost the ability to maintain that control. It had probably lost its link to the world and returned to the chaotic Void.

Xelloss seemed to mull over all that for a second. "I see," he said in complete indifference. "So in the end, they had a 'two-person collision' and only you survived. What a silly story. Ha ha."

His indifferent laugh was creepy, let me just say. *Maybe he wasn't a big fan of Phibrizzo or Phibrizzo's scheme.*

"All right," Xelloss said at last, turning away from me. "I can accept that."

"Are you leaving?" I asked.

"Yes; I have no business here anymore. Unless …" He kept his back turned toward me. "You want to tell me you won't forgive me and that I can never escape?"

He said the words in the same tone he would say "peaches and cream" or "utter destruction." But I was definitely used to that.

I shrugged. "You know how I feel about clichés, Xelloss. And picking a fight with you would only bring me personal satisfaction, and *only* if I won." I sighed. "Although I don't think letting you go does much good for the world, I'll deal with that when the time comes."

"I see." He glanced over his shoulder and flashed me his little smile. "I'll be off, then. I pray that if at all possible, we'll never meet again, Miss Lina … since I'll likely be working as priest under Greater Beast at that point."

"Which means we'll be meeting as enemies—maybe mortal ones. Right?"

Xelloss turned his face away from me again.

I sighed. "Later, Xelloss," I said. "I hope we never meet again, too."

An instant later, Xelloss' form wavered, then swayed, then melted into thin air.

And that was how Xelloss and I split.

"Mmm …" Almost as if waiting for the moment Xelloss disappeared, I heard a small moan nearby. I turned

to see Sylphiel slowly coming to with a shake of her head. Everyone around her seemed to be waking up, too.

Good timing.

If Zel and Amelia had seen Xelloss, thing might've gotten even more complicated. I wondered if Xelloss had done something to keep everyone out while we talked.

Everyone but Gourry grabbed their stomachs and looked really uncomfortable.

Oh. Right—they all ate Phibrizzo.

Since Phibrizzo had been consumed in the battle, even the fragments in their stomachs had vanished. It probably felt really weird.

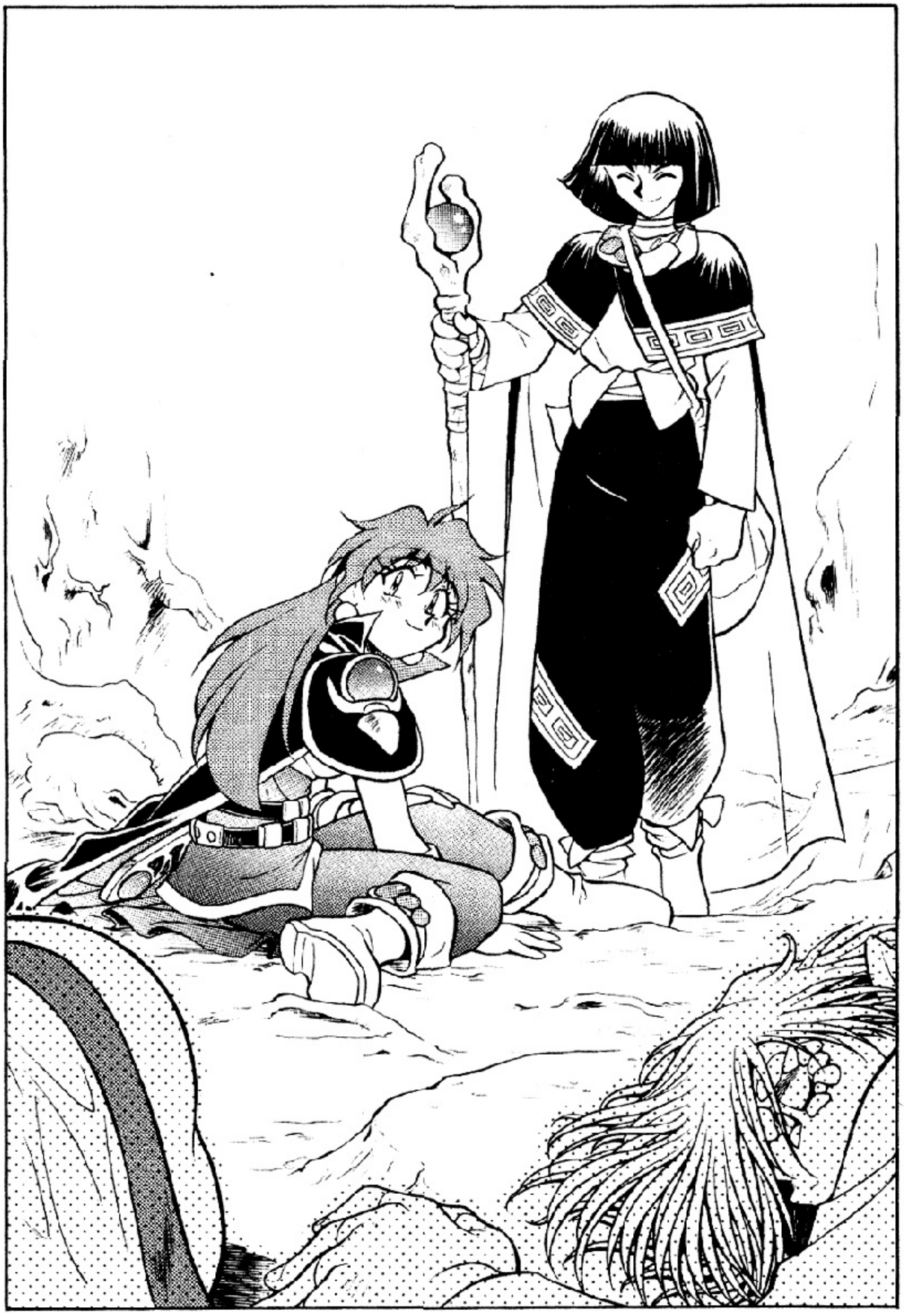
At any rate, everyone eventually sat up. They seemed fine, surprisingly, but unsurprisingly, they looked confused as hell. They let their eyes scan the crater before eventually falling on me.

Sylphiel's lips quivered. "M-Miss Lina?" she breathed.

"Hey." I smiled and waved.

Zelgadiss cleared his throat. "What happened?" he murmured dazedly as he looked around him again.

"Phibrizzo's been destroyed, so everything his power created vanished—and that includes the Palace of Hell and Sairaag City. We're probably where the Palace of Hell used to be—the bottom of the hole where Flagohn's roots were."



Sylphiel swallowed hard. “Hellmaster of Phibrizzo was … destroyed?” she asked. “Miss Lina, does that mean you used the spell?!”

Yikes.

“Oh! Um, about that.” After all the warnings Sylphiel had pounded into me, I suddenly felt really guilty. “It was a weird situation, okay? Everyone was, y’know, uh …”

I trailed off as Sylphiel’s gaze bore into me. I swallowed and looked away.

Amelia took that opportunity to jump to her feet and pose.

“Ah-ha!” she declared triumphantly. “Our Justice-loving hearts smashed Hellmaster’s wicked ambitions!”

“But we didn’t really do anything,” Zel commented.

Amelia stuck out her chest and slammed a fist against it. “We defended Justice, didn’t we?!”

Amelia’s little act seemed to relax Sylphiel (thankfully). She sighed and gave a weak little smile.

“I suppose we did,” she admitted. “And it seems that the spell didn’t run amok, after all.”

Er…

I thought it best not to go into details. I nodded as confidently as I could.

“Right. Yup! And I, uh, I’ll be sure not to use that spell twice!

Ha ha ha!" I was trying to be cute, but I could feel a trail of sweat streaking down my face.

So what if the Giga Slave not running amok was the result of simple coincidence. No harm, no foul! I figured "I did control it" was a fair white lie.

Gourry seemed as vague and pleasant as usual. "Okay" he said simply. "But can we get out of here? I don't really like chit-chatting at the bottom of a pit."

He had a point.

"Fine," I answered, and cast a Levitation spell.

★★★

The wind blew across the wasteland that Sairaag City had become … for a third time.

Still, weeds had begun sprouting all over the place. It was like the earth had started breathing again.

"I guess it's all over, then," Sylphiel murmured with a lonely smile. She sighed. "So," she said, turning back to look at us. "What are your plans from here on out?"

Amelia raised her fists and pointed to the sky. "I plan to return to Saillune!" she said with unnecessary fervor. "I must let everyone know that a great Evil has been destroyed, and that Justice has triumphed!"

It was times like those that I worried for Saillune's future. If she accidentally became queen someday, the country would become a

scary place.

Please, PLEASE let her turn out nice like Gracia.

"I'll start on my journey again," Zelgadiss said with distant, angsty eyes.

Right—his quest to become human again. He still didn't have any leads on that, did he? Gotta feel bad for that guy.

Sylphiel lowered her eyes. "So," she said timidly "Um, Mister Gourry … what are your plans?"

Gourry looked surprised to be asked. "Me?" he asked, further clarifying by pointing to himself.

Like there are any other Gourrys!

He looked over at me. "What's the plan?" he asked.

I blinked. "Wh-why are you asking me?" I blurted.

"Well, I just figured that…"

Sylphiel made a quiet sigh. "I understand," she murmured, but I didn't know what the heck she was

referring to. She made this unsettling dejected face.

"I'll return to Saillune," she said pathetically. "I'll continue to work as my uncle's assistant, but little by little I'll become qualified to become a high priestess. And then, someday, I'll return to Sairaag and rebuild the city."

It was a pretty lofty goal. Good, but lofty. "Wow," I said. "Good luck, Sylphiel."

She smiled in response.

So … what about Lina Inverse? I thought about my own fate for a second. I could go back to Zefiela for a bit and say hi to everyone back home. Or I could keep traveling aimlessly a little more—I do enjoy traveling aimlessly.

"Lina?" Gourry suddenly asked, breaking my concentration. "What happened to my Sword of Light?"

Oh.

"Right," I said. "Phibrizzo sent it to another world, I think. He said he returned it to its original owner."

Gourry stared at me a second, then gazed into the distance. "I see," he said in a rare moment.

Not having the Sword of Light was a big loss for the guy. He was definitely a first-rate swordsman, and nothing could take that away from him, but now he couldn't slice Mazoku in half.

That gave me an idea. "I got it!" I said, slamming a fist into a palm. "That's the next quest, Gourry! I'll find and give you a sword to replace the Sword of Light!"

Gourry's jaw dropped. "N-no way!" he spluttered. "Lina, did you just say something nice?!"

I glared at him. "What's *that* suppose to mean?" I hissed. "And besides, you wouldn't have gotten captured with the Sword of Light if I hadn't gotten Phibrizzo's attention. I *should* replace it, but a regular sword wouldn't be very fair."

Gourry frowned. “A sword to replace it won’t be easy to find, though, right?”

I waved my hand dismissively. “Don’t worry,” I assured him. “I’m sure we can find an awesome sword if we look.”

The Blessed Blade had probably been broken along with Flagohn, but it definitely wasn’t the only sword of legend lying around. The Blast Sword, the Red Dragon Blade, the Elmekia Blade … they had to be somewhere. Unless they were just fables.

Either way.

“I actually got a hold of a nameless magic sword on an earlier journey,” I explained. “I gave it to a girl from back home as a present, though. And hey—if we get a new, cool blade of legend, I can use it for sorcery research! So I’m plenty happy to go look.”

Gourry let out a breath. “Okay,” he said at last. “So we’re sticking together until we find a sword, right? You’re not gonna run off with my travel budget halfway through the trip?”

“As if I’d do something like that. Please.”

And dammit, don’t anyone dare say a thing.

“Okay.” Gourry smiled. “Then let’s get going!”

I tapped my chin. “Where to first, do you think?”

“I don’t think. You’re the one that does the thinking.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why don’t you surprise us all and give it a try?” I snapped as I grabbed his head and pushed.

We all split after that, going down our individual paths to our individual goals. Things had to get done, y'know? We couldn't just sit around all day.

We left the City of Ghosts far behind us.

Afterword

Important Warning!

This book is a direct sequel to Slayers volume seven, Gaav's Challenge. If you haven't read it yet, READ IT NOW.

Author = Hajime Kanzaka

L = Lord of Nightmares

S = Shabranigdu

A: It's here! It's finally here! Slayers Volume #8, "King of the City of Ghosts," whose lateness caused trouble across the Four Corners of Earth, is finally here! Done! Compleeeeeete!

L: Aren't you being contemplative.

A: Have a drink and forget your troubles!

L: …

S: Well, at any rate, it seems that we've settled the matter safe and sound.

A: Yep, yep. Slayers Part 1 safely concluded, too. It's such a deep feeling.

L: Mm. And I got a little screen action this time around.

A: Just a tiny bit, huh?

THWACK!

L: Did you have something you wanted to say? Huh?!

S: I don't think he's saying much of anything right now … He hit the back of his head on that chair.

L: Hmph. Humans are so fragile as of late. Now, then; we can't just sit here satisfied with ourselves, can we? There are tons of announcements we have for you this time.

A: Yes, our first announcement!

L: Hey! You came back?!

A; For this year's New Year's Cards, we have original pictures of Hajime Kanzaka and the little brat, L!

L: Little brat?!

A: Would you prefer "rascal," then?

L: That's even worse! Besides, no one sends New Year's cards out in the middle of summer!

A: But, er, I don't really have any other time to announce this … and it looks like plenty of readers who wrote in last year didn't get New Year's Cards. Just say it's fate and give up, please.

L: You're writing them this year, dammit.

A: And! Our next announcement!

S: Everyone! What you've all been waiting for has finally arrived! Behold: the second Slayers Character Popularity Contest!

Studio Audience: YAAAAAAY! (clap, clap, clap, clap)

A: We have a studio audience?

L: They're here to add flavor, as they say

A: Ah, yes. The author gives his thanks to everyone at the editorial bureau for allowing and cooperating with his completely whimsical plans. Thank you very much.

S: So, the announcement! Incidentally, the Top 10 in the tally from May of last year were Liol, The Author, A Girl from Back Home, L, Naga, Amelia, and #4, Lina, unexpectedly at #3, Xelloss! #2, Zel, and Gourry was the top selection! Now, how have things changed in the final results?!

L: I hope I didn't fall any further.

S: Liol the White Dragon easily fell out of 10th place, replaced by Zuuma the Assassin, rising up from #12! In 9th place: why is he so popular?! Holding his interim results position, The Author!

A: Yesssss!

L: Well, some people do go for Zuuma, after all. Liol's got a fair amount of points going for him, but I guess Zuuma has a few more.

A: Incidentally, Liol dropped to 15th in the final results.

S: Next announcement! 8th place belongs to the ever-

persistent, never-appearing A Girl From Back Home!

A: She was 11th the first time around. She's gotten more popular in the meantime. I wonder why?

S: And 7th, our beloved L! Furthermore, L is an

abbreviation for Lord of Nightmares.

L: Blech … I didn't go up any.

S: Coming in 6th is Lina's rival, she who is mocked by the entire world, the back end of a goldfish, Naga the Serpent!

A: By the way, on plus points alone, Naga got 297 to L's 251 … which didn't really mean it was close, though. But Naga got 40 minus points to L's 140!

L: WHAT?!

A: So when you subtract the minus points from the plus points, Naga was over 100 points. You don't get out much, see.

L: What have you done to me?!

A: This and that.

L: (mumble, mumble, mumble)

S: Allow us to continue. In 5th place is… why, suddenly dropping from 3rd place in the interim results, Xelloss!

A: He didn't have many minus points during the interim results, but since "Conspiracy at the Sorcerers' Guild" was published in the meantime, he suddenly got a lot of minuses and fell to 5th place.

L: Let's go live on the scene and ask Xelloss his feelings about this.

Xelloss: Oh, my. I'm hated, aren't I? Ha ha ha.

L: That was live from Xelloss in Noboribetsu!

A: Why Noboribetsu … ?

S: And in 4th place! She's a strong one: rising in the interim from Xelloss' fall, Princess Amelia!

A: The secret to her strength is getting a constant point total with a minimum of minus points. That's popularity for you.

Amelia: Justice indeed wins in the end!

A: And her easy-to-understand commentary.

S: And in 3rd place—oh, my! Zelgadiss! He's fallen from 2nd place in the interim results!

L: Your ranking fell since the interim results. How do you feel about that?

Zelgadiss: Not really interested, thank you.

L: Er … there's your commentary from Mister Zelgadiss.

S: Now, then! There's only #1 and #2 left! First, we'll announce the plus points!

(drum sounds heard from nowhere in particular)

Gourry Gabriev, 1031 points! Lina Inverse, 1004 points!

A: (heart racing)

S: And for minus, Gourry, 131! Lina, 67! With a total of 937 vs. 900, in 1st place, Lina Inverse!

(crowd goes wild!)

A: She finally did it! Lina Inverse finally defended her honor as main character! She rose from 4th place in the interim results, fighting in a manner befitting a main character, and smashed past the Top 3 to become undisputed Grand Champion!

L: First, we're linking to our 2nd place winner, Mister Gourry in Nishinippori…

A: Why Nishinippori… ?

L: So let's dig right in and ask! Mister Gourry, congratulations on winning 2nd place!

Gourry: (sighs)

L: A-anyway, here's our 1st place Miss Lina for her thoughts!

Lina: Ha! I knew this time would come! Not getting #1 in the voting the first two times around seemed like some kind of main character jinx! I'm happy just to have broken that.

L: And that was Miss Lina Inverse!

S: The others just below the Top 10 were Remii, First Royal Successor Phil, Duclis, and I, Minion S. Incidentally, please direct your votes to me, Shabranigdu, and not that pretender, Rezo Shabranigdu from the 1st volume. And filling out the rest of the Top 20 were: Mina, Riol, Thousand, Rezo, and tied for 20th place, Sylphiel, Clay, and wood golem (?).

A: Even though Minion S got 56 pluses, his 26 minuses kept him from laying a hand on Zuuma. Incidentally, the worst performer, notwithstanding his appearance in

Volume #7 which came out only just before the voting ended, was General Rashatt with 3 minus points. What's up with the demons … ?

S: There were some strange votes, weren't there? Lady A, 5

points. Greengrocer Man, 3 points.

A: Who? Who the hell is that?!

L: It gets better. Pasta dish, 5 points. Fine sake, 5 points.

A: They have fans, too?! You mean to tell me pasta dishes have fans?! Okay, for all you who voted like this, if you win the lottery draw, you might get colored paper, or you might get a pasta dish—personally signed by the author either way!

L: See? Now you might come to regret your joke vote.

S: You might find this interesting, too. Bandit A, 6 points.

A: I can't even remember more than two people who came out who were called "Bandit A." To go and vote for him … jeez.

S: Precisely. It would seem that Slayers fans are a rather varied lot.

L: Weirdoes.

S: Ah! Are you trying to turn more fans against you?!

L: Mind your own business!

A: In any case, that's how it is!

S: And so, "Saturday Night Fight! Slayers

Character Popularity Contest #2" is hereby proclaimed! L: With that settled, next time and onward it'll be Slayers Part 2. But… you *are* gonna write it, aren't you?

A: Not to worry! I have the outline of the final chapter of Part 2-in other words, the final chapter of "Slayers," largely mapped out

already!

S: You had Volume #8 here "largely mapped out," too, but you were still late with it.

A: Um! That's, uh …

L: The outline of the final chapter? You mean, *that story from before?*

A:…

L: …

S: …

A: A-anyway, everyone! It's time to finish this section! Thanks for all your support until now! See you again for Part 2!

L: Don't toy with me!

(Author dashes out with L and S chasing after him. Curtains.)